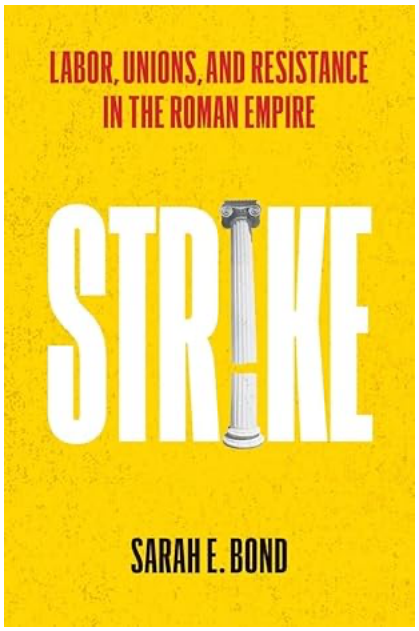
RBL 01/2026



Sarah E. Bond

Strike: Labor, Unions, and Resistance in the Roman Empire

Yale University Press, 2025. Pp. xv + 254. Hardcover. $35.00. ISBN 9780300273144.

Christopher B. Zeichmann
Toronto Metropolitan University

Strike is a book that, once you become aware of its existence, you cannot help but wonder why someone had not written it sooner. Sarah Bond has produced a remarkable volume that is timely, affordable, and of broad interest. It is the rare book that is suitable for a variety of undergraduate and graduate classrooms, as well as a worthwhile gift for a loved one involved in organized labor—retired or still on the job. Written with lively prose, concrete examples, and ample citation of both primary and secondary sources (mostly relegating untranslated Latin to the endnotes), *Strike* will provide pleasure to a range of readers.

The book's title is slightly misleading as it relates to the volume's scope in two ways. I note these not to nitpick but to clarify the scope of the book. First, although strikes are a central component of Bond's study, her interest more precisely lies in the organization of labor in antiquity: *collegia*, *familiae*, *synadoi*, among many other social formations. Indeed, Bond operates with a deliberate and thoroughly considered anachronism in terming these formations "unions" throughout the book. This decision proves an effective way of drawing out the resonances between past and present. Bond observes how these groups were perceived as a threat to moneyed and state interests, as well as how these groups were provided the social basis for resisting one or another form of exploitation. Thus, although temporary work stoppage is one among many ways ancient laborers organized themselves, I would hesitate to call slave revolts such as the Third Servile War a strike. Thus, the scope of its focus on practices of labor resistance is considerably broader than the title

would indicate. To be clear: the scope of the book is carefully thought out, and this broader consideration of organized labor was an excellent choice.

The second misleading part of the title is the reference to the Roman Empire, which may give readers the mistaken impression that the volume begins with the Roman Principate and ends with the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 CE. In fact, Bond's study begins with the early Roman Republic and continues through the reign of Justinian, with each chapter focusing upon a distinctive period within that range and connecting it with a particular theme for examination. It may help to briefly describe the contents of each chapter.

"Introduction: Striking from the Record" begins by orienting readers to the history of strikes and to the study of ancient labor associations. Much of this may be familiar to those who study Pauline social formations; this is done in conversation with the work of biblical scholars such as John Kloppenborg, Richard Ascough, Phil Harland, and Richard Last. From there, Bond discusses the mythic origins of these labor associations, as ancient writers commonly supposed that Rome's second king, Numa Pompilius (r. 716–674 BCE), was their originator. Roman politicians were anxious about distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate associations, tending to think of the older ones as less dangerous than newer ones.

Chapter 1, "The Plebs, Secession, and Military Strikes," connects the period of the early Roman Republic with "secession" as a form of labor disruption. Bond draws attention to how the patricians were not only far wealthier than most plebs but that their political influence meant that patricians mostly served as military commanders and left the actual fighting to plebian men. As Rome's military campaigns became an increasingly important part of its national identity, plebs fell further into debt, since these military ventures required farmers and other laborers to leave their work for long periods of time to risk life and limb to enact the patricians' military goals. In such a context, the threat of plebian secession from the city of Rome posed a considerable threat: not only would this halt a great deal of productive labor within the city, but it would also render Rome vulnerable in that its foot soldiers were no longer around to protect it. This chapter also introduces a leitmotif that one finds throughout the book: how organized labor facilitated democratic practices within Roman society; this ranges from the creation of the plebian tribune upon the secession of the plebs to freedom-seeking slaves banding together to reject their enslavers' demands.

Chapter 2, "We Are Spartacus: Labor and Resistance in the Late Republic," connects the period of the late Republic with enslaved entertainers. In this chapter, Bond makes a few compelling proposals about the Three Servile Wars of the late Roman Republic. Among these proposals is that the organization of gladiatorial labor into *familiae* created a sort of connective tissue among enslaved laborers, such that it served as a social resource for rebellion. Indeed, Bond argues that each of the Servile Wars involved slaves modeling their society upon one or another form of labor organization (i.e., *familae*, *ekklesiai*, *legiones*).

Chapter 3, "Freedom of Assembly during the Fall of the Republic," connects the final days of the Roman Republic with tensions between populist politicians who involved themselves in Roman labor groups and the old guard of politicians who sought to regulate and restrict these very groups. Central to this chapter is Bond's discussion of Clodius and Cataline, both of whom, she suggests, drew inspiration from Spartacus in their use of labor networks to advance one or another political agenda. Contrary to the common depiction of Julius Caesar as a man who advanced the interests of the common citizen by addressing debt crises, Bond depicts Caesar as a man who understood the radical potential of organized labor and regulated it so as to prevent workers from effectively networking for subversive purposes. The goal was to smother revolts in the making, so as to prevent them from creating problems for the wealthy.

Chapter 4, "Anxiety and Associations in the Early Roman Empire," connects the early Principate with the increased restrictions on freedom of assembly under the Julio-Claudian emperors. More specifically, the aristocratic fear of unauthorized assemblies led to greater surveillance and policing, particularly by the "urban cohorts" that sought to subdue any unrest that might emerge. Much of this was the work of Augustus in particular.

Chapter 5, "Strikes, Riots, and Associations in the Roman Imperial Period," connects the imperial expanse of the era stretching across the Flavian to Severan dynasties to the riots with strikes of the period. Bearing a special place in this discussion is the strike of the Ephesian bakers, whose association was resentfully tolerated by Asian politicians: the second-century crackdown on associations spared few (including Christians), but the importance of bakers to the sustenance of the Ephesian populace meant that it was too risky to banish them outright from gathering together. Rather, the governor issued an edict prohibiting political gatherings of bakers and dictated that any baker caught gathering in secret be branded on the foot.

Chapter 6, "Castes, Law, and Compulsory Labor in Late Antiquity," connects the Roman Dominate with money-based labor (e.g., mint workers, bankers). These laborers played a major role in economic policies and wealth production, making them a considerable liability to the Roman emperors. Emperors of the late Roman Empire found various ways of wrangling such workers, whether by reducing their number or by requiring such workers to travel with the emperor himself! The chapter's theme may feel a bit jarring: today, bankers are hardly thought to be of the same social and economic class as most other workers.[1]

1. By way of example, consider the only time bankers have gone on strike in recent years: Irish bankers went on strike in 1970, expecting it would tank the economy. Despite refusing to work for six months, the Irish economy was not only stable but grew. By contrast, when sanitation workers in New York went on strike in 1968, the contributions of their work was so immediately obvious that they received a considerable raise within a week. See the discussion in Rutger Bregman, "Inequality Explored," https://www.europeanpressprize.com/article/inequality-explored/.

Chapter 7, "Athletic Factions and Popular Rebellion," connects the last centuries of the Western Roman Empire with athletic groups. The use of enslaved labor for entertainment, especially for chariot racing, was pivotal in this period, further augmented by the fan bases for athletes and teams. It was hard to avoid thinking of more contemporary sports riots, often intoned not only with civic identity but also converging along questions of class and ethnic identification.

Across the book, it becomes clear that imperial elites did their best to control labor and prevent disruption, the contemporary relevance of which is never too far from the discussion; Bond draws forth relevant comparanda from more recent years and devotes her conclusion to subsequent organization of labor and its current difficulties in the United States. For all the discussion of labor (and implicit invocation of concepts such as the means of production), the book never feels like a Marxist sermon. It is hard to overstate how effectively Bond weaves together the vicissitudes of Roman history with the question of labor organization.

Of course, I write this review for the *Review of Biblical Literature*. The obvious question arises: How much of this book is relevant for our own field? To be direct: a considerable portion of the book discusses ancient Judaism, early Christianity, and the associations with which the apostle Paul may well have been interacting. To name a few examples, the Alexandrian riots involving Jews in 38 CE (as recounted by both Philo and Josephus) receive considerable attention, as does the expulsion of Jews under Claudius, Jewish *collegia*, and the like. Discussions of early Christianity are also fascinating, including the striking exclusion of charioteers and actors from Christian fellowship (citing *Canons from the Council of Arles* 1.4–5). The material is rich and fits well with current tendencies to understand both Jews and Christians as part of Roman society and not distinct from it.

Bond has written an excellent book that is readable and thought-provoking. It is hard to imagine anyone reading a single chapter without learning a considerable amount along the way, or at least being prompted to reconsider assumptions they have taken for granted. The upcoming paperback edition is remarkably affordable. Anyone working on Greco-Roman associations, ancient labor, ancient slavery, or the politics of resistance should buy a copy. The entire book or individual chapters would do well in classroom settings, too, and it would probably make a pretty good gift for a proud member of a union.