

DINOSAURS AND DONKEYS:  
BRITISH TABLOID NEWSPAPERS AND TRADE UNIONS, 2002-2010

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of RYAN JAMES THOMAS find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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DINOSAURS AND DONKEYS:  
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Abstract

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This study presents a critical discourse analysis of how three major British tabloid newspapers – *The Sun*, the *Daily Mail*, and the *Daily Mirror* – represented four major strikes – the Fire Brigades Union strike of 2002, the Communication Workers Union strikes of 2007 and 2009-2010, and the Lindsey Oil Refinery strike of 2009. It finds four themes in tabloid newspaper discourse: First, trade unions were represented as impediments to “modernization,” a term that was rarely defined but often demanded, which helped cast trade unions and their members as backward reactionaries and anachronisms in an age of neoliberalism. Second, trade unions were represented as bringers of chaos and destruction who posed a threat to the economy, public safety, and the wellbeing of society. Third, tabloid newspapers focused on the relationship between trade unions and the Labour Party (and Labour leaders in particular). Fourth, and finally, tabloid newspapers highlighted immigration as an issue that intersected with traditional industrial relations in complex ways.

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## DEDICATION

*“It’s impossible to write the history of freedom in this country without telling how trade unions have contributed to it” ~ Michael Foot*

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Meryl and Wayne Thomas, my sister, Carly Thomas, and my fiancée, Lexi Ford. It is also dedicated to my political hero, Aneurin Bevan, who reminds us that being working class is something to be proud of.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Friedrich Engels once described the relationship between capital and labor as “the axis on which our entire present system of society turns” (quoted in Hunt, 2009, p. 237). The system Engels was referring to – capitalism – is organized around the relationship between a capitalist class that owns the means of production and a working class that must sell its labor to capitalists for a wage. It can be said that under capitalism “one set of people... live off the labor of others” (Shaikh, 1986, p. 73). In order for the capitalist system to function, the capitalist class must generate profit by paying workers less than their work is worth. This was an observation made by no less than Adam Smith, who said employers “are always and everywhere in a sort of tacit, but constant and uniform combination, not to raise the wages of labor above their actual rate” (1776/1910, p. 59). The relationship between capital and labor in a capitalist society can be described as one of “mutual antagonism and interdependence” (Clark, 1981, p. 414). The relationship is antagonistic because the interests of capital and labor are inimical, but it is also interdependent as each depends on the other: capital needs a workforce to generate profit while labor needs capital to provide a wage. Though Engels was writing in the nineteenth century, his arguments are no less true today, for “class struggle is a necessary and inherent property of a social system in which the maximization of the profits and power of one class depends on the maximization of its exploitation and domination of another” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 28).

One way in which the interests of labor can be maintained and advanced against the interests of capital is via the organization of workers into trade unions. In one of the earliest works to chart the history of the trade union movement, Sidney and Beatrice Webb (1896) define

a trade union as a “continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of employment” (p. 1). The function of trade unions is to ensure that the rights of workers are not trampled upon by employers and unrestrained capital; for Webb and Webb (1896), their “fundamental purpose” is “the protection of the standard of life - that is to say, the organized resistance to any innovation likely to tend to the degradation of the wage-earners as a class” (p. 2). At the local level, trade unions organize workers in specific trades, organizations, or sectors of industry and place pressure upon employers to achieve improvements in pay, benefits, and working conditions that would not necessarily be possible if left to the whims of the free market (Wood, 2004). At the societal level, trade unions organize the interests of the working class into a collective body with the strength to exert pressure upon governments to enact policies that benefit the class as a unified body, expressing “the importance of class as a principle of social organization” (Western, 1997, p. 6) and reminding workers of their position relative to the capitalist power structure. Throughout, the objective is an equitable and sustainable existence for the worker, assumed to be unattainable if left to the untrammelled free market, for labor politics hinges on “the demands that the state enforces such rights in the face of capitalist resistance” (Tilly, 1995, p. 13). Trade unions are able to use their power to obtain concessions favorable to the interests of the workforce, be it the prevention of job losses, higher wages, improvements in benefits, or a change in the workplace environment. When negotiations fail, an extremely powerful weapon in the arsenal of the workforce – though one which must be used sparingly – is the withdrawal of labor and removal of the very thing capital depends on.

As “the main channel through which the aspirations and interests of those located in the workplace can be represented in the public domain and directed towards the formal political system” (Manning, 1998, p. 7), trade unions are concerned with communication, whether it is the

presentation of issues to unorganized workers who would benefit from unionization or the articulation of the concerns of the working class as a bloc to the political sphere. However, trade unions possess “little access to the media, and union newspapers and journals have a comparatively limited readership” (Roiser & Little, 1986, p. 271), necessitating dependency on news media coverage in order to garner public awareness and support. For Manning (1998), “the extent to which trade unions can secure the coherent presentation of their agendas and an effective representation of their perspectives is [an] indicator of the health of the mainstream public sphere” (p. 7). If coverage is complete, accurate, and fair, the public will be better able to comprehend the ebb and flow of industrial relations and understand the role that trade unions play in the workplace and in society. The news media’s role is magnified in times of industrial dispute, as media coverage is critical to the success of a strike through the influence it has on public opinion (Manning, 1998, 1999). For Goldman and Rajagopal (1991) “the test case for any analysis about the ideological character of [the] news is when there is a breakdown of the ‘consensus’ for all to see – when there is a strike” (pp. *xii-xiii*). Therefore, an important site of research for scholars concerned with the health of the public sphere is how trade unions, specifically those on strike, are represented in the news media.

### **Introduction to the Present Study**

The news media serve an important social function in connecting the public to the political sphere (Altschull, 1985). It can be said that “our relations to social reality are mediated by systems of symbolic representation” (Garnham, 1995, p. 68). That is to say that people come to understand society and their place in it through the information provided by the news media. However, scholars have argued that news media organizations and the individuals that comprise



them are not innocent stenographers of fact, but active participants in the generation of meaning. For Carey (1974), the news media “bring a certain kind of world into existence” (p. 246), or, in other words, *construct reality*, connecting the citizen to society by representing society to the citizen. These constructions have consequences: how the public respond to a particular issue event, institution, organization, or person depends on what they think about it; what they think about it depends on what they know about it; and what they know about it depends on what they have been told about it – in other words, how it has been *represented* to them (Richardson, 2007). Central to this process is discourse, which is “the instrument of the social construction of reality” (van Leeuwen, 1993, p. 193). When scholars examine texts like newspapers they are looking to see how certain realities are brought into existence. This study is concerned with the discourse of industrial disputes in the news media and therefore with how the relationship between capital and labor, and its breakdown in the form of a strike, is represented. Discourse analysts examine discourse in context, for “our understanding of a communicative act is shaped, in part, by... the context in which [it] occurs” (Richardson, 2007, p. 11). Scholars must ensure that their studies are both theoretically coherent and practical, looking at discourse as it is socially situated and for specific reasons rather than plucking a particular text out of “thin air,” as it were. There are therefore some important questions that need to be addressed.

### **Where does the discourse take place?**

Since the late 1970s, the balance of power between capital and labor has tipped dramatically in favor of capital. According to Harvey (1989), over this period capitalism has become ever more “expansionary and imperialistic,” drawing more of “cultural life” into “the grasp of the cash nexus and the logic of capital circulation” (p. 344). This has been paralleled by the diminution of trade union power across the western world (Fairbrother & Yates, 2003).

Nowhere, arguably, has the fall of trade unionism been more dramatic than in the United Kingdom, where “the most sustained assault on trade unionism among advanced capitalist countries in the postwar period” (Howell, 2005, p. 133) mounted by the Margaret Thatcher-led Conservative governments of the 1980s saw the power of trade unions systematically broken. Once key players in the formulation of economic policy in the post-World War Two era (Gamble, 1988), trade unions at the turn of the twenty-first century were reduced to being “consulted more often than negotiated with” (Howell, 2005, p. 1). Meanwhile, trade union density fell from an all-time high of 55.8% of the workforce in 1979 to 29.5% in 1999 (Waddington, 2000). As the twentieth century drew to a close, British trade unionism seemed to be “more-or-less finished business” (Murray, 2003, p. 10) with strikes at their lowest level since records began (Howell, 2005). In the intervening period, the western world experienced a major reorientation away from the “welfare state” model that dominated capitalist economies immediately following the Second World War, toward a model that dramatically bolstered the power of capital against the power of labor, a model Harvey (2003, 2005, 2006) describes as “neoliberalism.” The decline of trade unionism in Britain, as in other countries, can be considered a symptom of a broader social reorientation toward the interests of capital.

British trade unionism is also a fascinating site of inquiry because of the manner in which trade unions are integrated into the political economic landscape as a result of their role as the founders and principal financial backers of the Labour Party, one of the two main political parties in the United Kingdom since 1922, and (in theory if not necessarily in practice) the vehicle for the delivery of democratic socialism to the British public. Indeed, the founding of the Labour Party was a deliberate strategy to broaden the role of trade unions and position them at the fulcrum of public life (Minkin, 1992). As a result, industrial relations and party politics are

“inextricably linked” (Howell, 2005, p. 3) in a manner unusual to many western societies. Therefore this study is concerned with trade union representation in the United Kingdom.

### **When does the discourse take place?**

At the close of the twentieth century, British trade unions, mirroring the fate of organized labor across the developed world, appeared to be “locked in a cycle of political marginalization and decline” (Wood, 2004, p. 1) as a result of a slew of industrial relations legislation. However, in the opening years of the twenty-first century, the seemingly dormant trade union movement was revitalized by the emergence of a new generation of assertive trade union leaders and a membership invigorated by a newfound “culture of militancy and protest” (Murray, 2003, p. 12). Murray (2003) predicted the 2002-2003 strike by the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) would be the turning point that heralded a new age of assertive trade unionism. Murray’s words proved to be prophetic, as the number of working days lost to industrial disputes rose dramatically in the years that followed (Lyddon, 2009), indicating that this was indeed a reassertion of trade union power. This study examines news media representations of selected strikes from 2002 to 2010, a time of trade unions resurgence. Analyzing coverage of multiple strikes over a sustained period of time rather than of a single dispute allows for a sharper understanding of the intersections of media representations and organized labor in the twenty-first century, enhancing this study’s explanatory power. It should also be noted that the identified period is intriguing because it occurs at the same time as a Labour government is in office; specifically, Tony Blair’s (and, latterly, Gordon Brown’s) “New Labour,” which was, in the words of one scholar, “every bit as hostile to the exercise of the right to strike as previous Conservative governments” (Howell, 2005, p. 186). This study can illuminate how the relationship between the Labour Party and the trade unions is represented in the news media.

## **What kind of discourse is being examined?**

This study focuses specifically on newspaper representations of organized labor. Though there are a plethora of information sources available to the twenty-first century public, scholars have pointed to how newspapers frame the news agenda for other forms of media and serve as a key influence on the political, social, and economic beliefs of the British public (see, e.g., Brynin & Newton, 2003; Curtice & Semetko, 1994; Newton, 1992; Saunders, Marsh, & Ward, 1993). Perhaps of greater importance to discourse analysts, however, is what newspapers reveal about the tapestry of British society. A deft summation of this role comes from Francis Williams, former editor of the now-defunct *Daily Herald*:

Newspapers are unique barometers of their age. They indicate more plainly than anything else the climate of the societies to which they belong. This is not simply for the obvious reason that they are a source of news about their time but because the conditions in which they operate, the responsibilities they are expected, or allowed to fulfill, the pressures they have to meet, their circulation and economic base, the status of those who write for them, and their relationship to their readers, all provide a direct insight into the nature of their communities (Williams, 1969, p. 1).

Newspapers provide windows into particular historical epochs and enrich public understanding of the structure and ethos of society. In analyzing a broad corpus of data, this study is able to chart the arc of British industrial relations over a sustained period through looking at how newspapers have reported on particular strikes.

In their survey of global media systems, Hallin and Mancini (2004) describe the British newspaper system as “the strongest example” of market segmentation that distinguishes between a “sensationalist mass press” and “quality papers addressed to an elite readership” (p. 25). In

other words, British newspapers are designed with particular social classes in mind. The British newspaper system is divided into a broadsheet and tabloid press, with the broadsheet newspapers serving a more affluent readership and the tabloid press catering to a working class audience. The tabloids' mainstream appeal is relatively unique to the British newspaper system (Stephenson & Bromley, 1998). Unlike, for example, in the United States, where tabloids are considered a wholly different institution to the mainstream press (Bird, 1992), British tabloids comprise a major component of the British newspaper market. Indeed, the sales of tabloid and “midmarket” newspapers comprise close to a staggering 80% of all newspaper sales in the country in 2008, with three newspapers alone – the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Mirror*, and *The Sun* – possessing readerships that accounts for 70% of the overall newspaper market (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: British national daily newspaper circulation figures (from McNair, 2009, p. 3)**

	1988	1998	2008
<b>BROADSHEET PRESS</b>			
<i>Financial Times</i>	286,774	362,000	131,807
<i>The Daily</i>	1,138,673	1,067,000	813,346
<i>The Guardian</i>	470,023	400,000	302,636
<i>The Independent</i>	375,317	225,000	176,785
<i>The Times</i>	450,626	770,000	576,444
<b>MIDMARKET/TABLOID PRESS</b>			
<i>Daily Express</i>	1,679,438	1,133,000	694,260
<i>Daily Mail</i>	1,792,701	2,312,000	2,042,453
<i>Daily Mirror</i>	3,850,579	3,006,000	1,715,130
<i>Daily Star</i>	1,013,688	664,000	606,331
<i>The Sun</i>	4,146,644	3,701,000	2,884,987
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>15,204,463</b>	<b>13,640,000</b>	<b>9,944,179</b>

When one looks at the reading habits of the British public at large, 52.4% of the population read a tabloid newspaper, while 12.9% read a broadsheet newspaper (Bednarek, 2006, p. 13). The readership of British newspapers is structured around class; according to Worcester (1998),

“hardly anything so divides the British by class as does their newspaper reading habits” (p. 41). This segmentation allows scholars to examine how *particular newspapers* report on *particular topics* to *particular audiences*.

Class is, of course, an elusive term to define. As noted at the onset of this chapter, a purely classical Marxist approach would see class defined through one’s relationship with the means of production. On the other hand, the twentieth century Marxist historian E. P. Thompson (1963) argued that class is not a “structure” or a “category” but “something which in fact happens... in human relationships,” something ethereal that emerges through “common experiences” (p. 9). Defining class is clearly a difficult task. While not necessarily making a full departure from either Marx or Thompson, I am most comfortable with the definition offered by Coole (1996), who argued that class is a type of “structured economic inequality which often correlates with cultural differences in values, perspectives, practices and self-identity but which is not primarily produced by cultural distinctions” (p. 17). In other words, class has an economic basis but is also manifested in the realm of culture. One such manifestation is newspaper readership.

The relationship between social class and newspaper readership is articulated best by the National Readership Survey (NRS) social grade system. This system was devised by the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising as a means of tracking newspaper readership in a heavily segmented system (Tonks & Farr, 2001) and has come to be the standard measurement of social class in Britain, used by the government and polling agencies. According to a report published by the polling organization Ipsos MORI, the NRS social grade system is “the most widely known as used” form of classification of social classes (Ipsos MORI, 2009, ¶1), while Tonks and Farr (2001) describe it simply as “the established method” for such classification (p. 192). The NRS

system classified people’s economic status into a social grade from A to E (leaving aside the aristocracy, who are considered a statistically insignificant minority). The NRS divides people into groups on the basis of the occupation of the head of the household. Figure 2 shows the breakdown of British social classes, based on the most recent NRS data at the time of writing.

**Figure 2: British social grades (National Readership Survey, 2010).**

GRADE	DESCRIPTION	% OF POP.
A	Upper middle class; Higher managerial, administrative, and professional	4
B	Middle class; Intermediate managerial, administrative, and professional	23
C1	Lower middle class; Supervisory, clerical, and junior managerial; Administrative/professional; Non-manual labor	29
C2	Skilled working class; Skilled manual workers	21
D	Semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers	15
E	Pensioners; Casual and lowest grade wage-earners; Unemployed; State supported	8

Tabloid newspapers are overwhelmingly the newspapers of choice for the British working class, as illustrated in Figure 3. Beckett (1977) describes tabloid newspapers as “the channel[s] through which the British working class find out what is going on in the world” (p. 45). Tabloid newspapers perform an important role in their coverage of organized labor as they draw working class readers into debates on economics, the workplace, labor rights, class identity, and the relationships between labor and capital, labor and government, and labor and private citizen. They play a key role in times of industrial dispute by communicating information about the strike, its root causes, and its actors to its readership of fellow workers (both unionized and nonunionized). Tabloid newspapers thus shape understandings of economic forms of class

struggle and have the potential, as papers with mass audiences, to either solidify or rupture the class solidarity that is pivotal to the success or failure of a dispute. Tabloid newspapers are a key site of struggle over the meaning of class and how workers should respond to the power of capital against their interests. To date, there has been no study to examine, in systematic fashion, how tabloid newspapers have represented organized labor in the United Kingdom. Therefore this study is uniquely positioned to make a valuable contribution to existing literature.

**Figure 3: British newspaper readership by social grade (Cole & Harcup, 2010, p. 38).**

	A	B	C1	C2	D	E
<b>BROADSHEET PRESS</b>						
<i>Fin. Times</i>	20.4	56.1	19.7	2.7	0.5	0.5
<i>D. Telegraph</i>	16.1	43.3	27.7	7.2	3.1	2.5
<i>Guardian</i>	13	49.9	28	3.2	3.3	2.5
<i>Independent</i>	11.2	45.4	33.4	6.2	2.8	0.9
<i>The Times</i>	14.7	48.1	26.3	6.2	2.8	1.8
<b>MID-MARKET/TABLOID PRESS</b>						
<i>Daily Express</i>	2.3	24	36.5	22.3	9.2	5.7
<i>Daily Mail</i>	5.2	26.6	34.2	19.4	10.4	4.2
<i>Daily Mirror</i>	1.2	10.5	28.5	29.5	21.5	8.6
<i>Daily Star</i>	0.3	6.8	21.5	32.1	29.4	9.9
<i>The Sun</i>	0.8	9.8	25.5	30.9	22.9	10.1

### **Rationale for Study**

Trade unions, for Manning (1998), provide a channel through which the concerns of the working class “could be represented to the bourgeois or mainstream ‘public sphere’” (p. 7). Therefore, how they are represented by the news media has important consequences for the smooth and fair workings of industrial relations. This is particularly important role in times of industrial conflict. It is undoubtedly true that the media play a key role during industrial disputes by providing the opposing perspectives; in some cases the arguments that are most effectively presented in the media may even contribute to the final outcome of industrial action (Jones,



1986; Manning, 1998, 1999). Analyzing media representations of organized labor is important in the context of what it illuminates about particular disputes but also about economic relations under capitalism.

The social theorist Max Horkheimer (1989) once argued that the “real social function of philosophy lies in the criticism of what is prevalent” (p. 264), imploring scholars to grapple with the key issues of the age. Surveying contemporary society, one sees the logic of the market as subjugating all before it. This is not in the public interest and is a potentially fatal threat to democracy. Scholars “understand the world in order to change it” (Gibson-Graham, 1996, p. 1) and this study aims to make a contribution to the betterment of social relations. Understanding how neoliberalism is constructed in the public sphere and communicating this to the public enables space for the discussion of more equitable and sustainable economic frameworks rather than one that has generated greater income and wealth inequality than has been seen since the industrial revolution (Arestis & Sawyer, 2005; Harvey, 2003, 2005, 2006, Irvin, 2008; Nesbit, 2006; Rapley, 2004). Neoliberalism has “become hegemonic as a mode of discourse” (Harvey, 2005, p. 3), an unassailable “common sense” defining the parameters of political economy. Trade unions, as barriers to unrestrained capital, have oppositional interests to neoliberalism, for organized labor seeks a state with protections for labor built into its genetic makeup. While scholars have produced a rich body of work looking at how news media discourses have naturalized the logic of neoliberalism (see, e.g., Fairclough, 1992, 2000a, 2002, 2003; Fenton, 2011; McKnight, 2003; Phelan, 2007a, 2007b), there has to date been little scholarship focusing on mediated representations of organized labor under neoliberalism. This study fills this prominent gap in the literature.

By a similar token, there is much seminal work published on mediated representations of organized labor, but the majority of this scholarship hails from the 1970s and 1980s when British industrial relations were fractious and trade unions were powerful and influential social actors (see, e.g., Beharrell & Philo, 1977; Blumler & Ewbank, 1970; Edwards, 1979; Glasgow University Media Group, 1976, 1980, 1982; Hartmann, 1976; Jones, 1986; McColl, 1980; Wade, 1985). There is a distinct paucity of recent research on media coverage of trade unions into the twenty-first century, a state of affairs likely due to the dramatic decline in union power, influence, and membership since the 1980s, but also a sad indication of the communication field's ignorance of class as a stratifying force and field of inquiry (Philo & Miller, 1998, 2000, 2001). McChesney (2004a) reminds scholars of the foolishness of discarding class at a time when "people still work, poverty among workers is growing, [and] *workplace conflicts are as important as ever*" (p. 76, my emphasis). Drawing on McChesney, one could argue that in fact scholarly attention should be on trade unions more than ever, as they are one of the few remaining bastions against the vagaries of the unchecked free market and a culture that has subordinated democracy to the whims of the marketplace (Giroux, 2005). In an age where the odds are stacked against labor, it is more important than ever that media scholars grapple with how labor is represented. Trade unions are at the forefront of promoting an alternative vision of society, "concerned with the broader emancipation of labor in an unequal world divided by class, status, and power" (Taylor, 2005, p. 185). It is for this reason that Rigby, Smith, and Brewster (2006) described trade unions as "bulwarks of a democratic society" (p. 132). In his history of the trade union movement, Wood (2004) pointed out that "the rise of unions within the advanced societies in most cases took place coterminously with the rise of the broadening of the mainstream democratic discourse" (p. 11). It is no coincidence that the decline of labor power in

the closing quarter of the twentieth century occurred at the same time as “the increasing power of large corporations, the weakening of the public sphere, and widening social inequality” (Wood, 2004, p. 12). Understanding how the institutional agent of the working class is represented in the news media in this era is a worthy goal for it advances our understanding of the intersections of the media and political economy.

This study also calls the communication field’s attention back to class as a site of analysis. According to Butt (2006), class as a concept has been in “more or less a state of decomposition since the 1970s” (p. 5), while Sayer (2005) describes it as “an embarrassing and unsettling subject” (p. 1) that dare not be spoken for fear one be considered reactionary and out of step with the times. As scholars wrestled with the profound economic and political changes of the 1980s, many turned away from the concept of class altogether. Skeggs (2005) notes the cruel irony of how class disappeared from scholarship at precisely the same time that “economic polarization reached unparalleled depths” (p. 45) in the United Kingdom, while Wood (1991) bemoans how “at the very moment when the world is coming ever more within the totalizing logic of capitalism and its homogenizing impulses... [and] we have the greatest need for conceptual tools to apprehend that global totality,” scholarship has abandoned the battlefield for other pastures (p. 93). According to Calcutt and Hammond (2001), scholars turned away from class toward “questions of identity and difference, hoping to find more political life in the so-called ‘new social movements’ of feminism, gay liberation, and anti-racism” (p. 164), which leads Munt (2000) to complain about how class is not “sexy enough” for scholars obsessed with the “intellectual eroticism” of gender, race, and sexuality (p. 7). The critical discourse analyst Norman Fairclough (1995a), while acknowledging the theoretical and political advances of these fields, nonetheless maintains that scholarly concern should be for “social relations of domination

within a social system which is capitalist, and dominated by – but not reducible to – relations of class” (p. 18). Fairclough takes issue with analyses that are not grounded in social relations. In a later work, Fairclough (2001) argued that “class relations define the nature of the society, and have a fundamental and persuasive influence on all aspects of the society” (p. 28). There is no evidence whatsoever to indicate the disappearance of class (Reid, 1998) and claims that class is obsolete “ring hollow in the steadily mounting gap between rich and poor” under neoliberalism (Gillies, 2008, p. 836). Indeed, as May (2006) notes, the property relationships that underpin the class structure have not only remained intact but have sharply intensified in the closing quarter of the twentieth century and opening years of the twenty-first. Capitalism remains a “system of social power” (Garnham, 1990, p. 7) that must be interrogated.

This study seeks to provide an analysis of media representations of organized labor that is accessible to a lay audience, for scholars “cannot absolve [themselves] from the responsibility” of communicating their ideas and knowledge “to those who do not belong, professionally, in the intellectual class” (Hall, 1992, p. 281). One of the great tragedies of media and cultural studies in the last quarter of the twentieth century was the increased opacity of the scholarship, which became ridden with “complex and expanded meanings hidden to all but the tutored reader” (Ferguson & Golding, 1997, p. *xxi*). This “arcane and pointless” (Philo, 1999, p. *xvii*) language must be firmly rejected because its insularity limits the explanatory power of socially conscious scholarship and isolates scholars from those who would best benefit from such ideas and from the public policy process. Hall (1992) counsels scholars to consider how their scholarship as an “intervention in a world” that “would make some difference... [and] have some effect” (p. 286). For Hall, “there is all the difference in the world between understanding the politics of intellectual work and substituting intellectual work for politics” (p. 286). In other words, where

scholars write to an increasingly specialized, introspective audience, they fail to live up to their fiduciary responsibilities. If those who would best benefit from critical insight are shut out from the conversation, this insight is, frankly, meaningless. This study sets out to heighten awareness of the mechanisms by which language sustains neoliberalism and hopefully contribute to the generation of a critical consciousness among media consumers that will challenge these strategies. It is my hope this study will not only be of use in the project of understanding neoliberalism and its attendant presuppositions but in the project of dismantling it. In this sense, this study is undertaken, to quote Raymond Williams (1974), “because it needs to be done” (p. 25).

### **Research Questions**

The research questions for this study are designed to be broad and exploratory so as to contribute to multiple areas of literature. They are as follows:

*RQ1: How do British tabloid newspapers represent industrial disputes in the twenty-first century?*

*RQ2: What does British tabloid newspaper coverage of industrial disputes in the twenty-first century reveal about the role of trade unions in contemporary society?*

Answering these questions will advance understanding of the discursive strategies used by tabloids to construct trade unionism to working class audiences, the role of organized labor in the twenty-first century, the nature of class relations in the twenty-first century, and the relationship between the Labour Party and the trade unions. Through its capacity to speak to interlocking areas of literature, this study is well-positioned to make a contribution to ongoing conversations in media studies, sociology, political science, history, and economics. It will also be of use to

trade unionists in understanding the kinds of strategies used by newspapers with working class readerships as unions look to ways of appealing to the public. Importantly, this study will also be of use to the general public – specifically the working class – in advancing understanding of the ways that newspapers frame issues and package them for specific audiences in a manner that supports the dominant economic ideology in twenty-first century Britain.

To address these research questions, this study examines coverage by *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Mirror*, and *The Sun* of four major strikes in the first decade of the twenty-first century: the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) strike of 2002-2003, the Communication Workers Union (CWU) strikes of 2007 and 2009, and the Lindsey Oil Refinery strike of 2009. The three newspapers have readerships that are predominantly working class and are the three newspapers with the highest circulation in Britain, with a total daily circulation of 6,642,570 newspapers sold daily, according to the latest available data (see Figure 1). Given their reach into British society and that the stated aim of this study is to examine *how* the working class is represented *to* the working class, these three newspapers are an excellent resource for resolving the research questions posed above.

### **Outline of Study**

Chapter Two discusses the roles and responsibilities of journalism in democratic societies and the tensions these roles and responsibility pose with a capitalist economic system where newspapers must generate profit. The chapter examines the contribution of key scholars (namely, John Dewey, Jürgen Habermas, and Richard Hoggart) in advancing an understanding of the relationship between the press and the public. The chapter also provides an overview of the composition of the British press and the tabloid newspapers in particular.

Chapter Three discusses the theoretical framework for this study. It introduces and discusses the ontological and epistemological assumptions of critical discourse analysis (CDA), pointing specifically to the scholarship of Norman Fairclough as a roadmap for understanding the intersection of discourse and material social relations. The chapter examines the concepts of ideology and hegemony and how newspapers play a role in the support of dominant ideologies. The chapter closes with an argument that the notion of ideology is important for media studies and should not be rejected so hastily, as it has been since the advent of poststructuralism.

Chapter Four situates trade unions in historical and political context, discussing how their role has changed over the course of the twentieth century, from the early days of the Labour Party, through the “post-war consensus” of the Attlee government, through the reforms of Margaret Thatcher that transformed industrial relations (and not, from the unions perspective, for the better), up to New Labour and the turn of the twenty-first century. It also builds upon the previous two chapters by highlighting the relationship between the trade union movement and the British press.

Chapter Five returns to critical discourse analysis and, having established its theoretical principles, explains the methodology that guides this study. The chapter provides a brief summary of the selected newspapers before explaining how the texts under scrutiny will be identified, obtained, and analyzed.

Chapters Six through Nine discuss the findings of this study. First, this study finds that trade unions are presented as impediments to “modernization,” a term that is often demanded but rarely defined. Second, tabloid newspapers use old, familiar tropes of chaos and destruction to address the issue of striking trade unions. Third, newspapers emphasized the relationship between the trade unions and the Labour Party, highlighting the fractious nature of this pairing.

Finally, newspapers positioned immigration as an emergent issue in industrial relations. Chapter Ten provides a summary of this study, its major implications, and directions for future study.



## CHAPTER TWO

### JOURNALISM IN A CAPITALIST DEMOCRACY

Newspapers are, by their very design, assemblages of words that, when put into a certain sequence, generate meaning. This is to say that the key property of newspapers is discourse. However, discourse is not hermetically sealed but socially situated and specific. Richardson (2007) bemoans the tendency within discourse analysis to suture together discourses in a manner that pays little regard to their specificities, the material relations that give rise to them, and the different social functions of different discourses in different contexts. Richardson's concern is with the treatment of journalism in discourse analyses, chiding scholars who "concertina" journalism into an amalgam of other discourses and treat it as interchangeable with, for example, political speeches, song lyrics, or cultural texts like television dramas or movies (p. 76). This "one size fits all" approach will not do, given the particulars of journalism and the very specific social role journalism plays. If journalism is to be properly critiqued, it must be properly understood. Scholarly discourse and the public good are served poorly by scholarship that treats journalism as just another kind of discourse and just as poorly by scholarly works that condemn journalists for not doing the work of sociologists. If scholars possess a clear understanding of what journalism is and acknowledge the fiduciary role that it plays in democratic society, their critiques depart from abstraction and become grounded and constructive. The purpose of this chapter is to illuminate the matter of journalism's role in society. Accordingly, it focuses on the role of journalism and the responsibilities that journalists bear in democratic society. The chapter looks at the contributions of John Dewey, Jürgen Habermas, and Richard Hoggart as ways of understanding journalism's relationship with the polity. The chapter proposes the argument that

journalism operates under structural constraints imposed upon it by a capitalist economic system, before examining structure, history, and features of the British tabloid press.

### **What is Journalism For?**

To ask the question “what is journalism for?” is to imply that journalism serves a particular purpose, and in so doing imply that journalism bears particular responsibilities. The very definition of a “role” is conditional on whosoever occupies it performing certain tasks and duties in concordance with that role. Therefore, ascribing a particular fiduciary role to journalism tacitly indicates that journalists (and other members of the journalistic community, such as editors and columnists) have an obligation to execute this role. The question is also a normative, rather than an objective, question. If one were to ask a dozen people for an answer to this question, one might get a dozen different responses. Therefore one must be cognizant that the responses from the scholarly literature are indicative of the particular epistemological and ontological positions of the particular scholars. The discussion offered here is a reflection of my own particular biases and inclinations, which are toward the social responsibility tradition of mass communication (cf. Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956). This tradition considers the function of the news media holistically, taking into account the rights and responsibilities of journalism and seeing them as linked to one another, as opposed to a reductive libertarian free press theory that sees media freedom as an end in and of itself and assumes that “if a viewpoint is missing in the press, [it] is only because it lacks a sufficient following to sustain it in the marketplace” (Curran & Seaton, 2010, p. 326; for an overview of the libertarian tradition, see Merrill, 1974, 1986; Siebert et al, 1956). This approach, amalgamating the classic liberalism of John Milton, John Locke, and John Stuart Mill with the contemporary work of Robert Nozick

and his argument that government play no role greater than that of “night watchman” (Nozick, 1974), suggests that journalism’s role is simply to be free – in other words, to surrender to the whims of the free market and hope the “invisible hand” works its magic. A framework that devotes itself to freedom to the neglect of responsibility is of little utility to this study (nor, indeed, to journalism studies more broadly). Instead, social responsibility approaches stress rights as conditional inasmuch as they are granted through the social contract. Groups are granted rights because they perform particular social functions, and the maintenance of these rights is tied to their execution of these functions. In other words, rights are tied to responsibilities.

Writing chiefly to an American audience but articulating the principles of journalism in western democracies, Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) put forward ten “elements of journalism,” nine of which articulate particular responsibilities for the field, the tenth referring to the rights and responsibilities of citizens. “Journalism’s first obligation,” they state, “is to the truth” (p. 5), arguing that “truth” is not simply the recollection of fact but entails placing facts “into a meaningful context” (p. 40). This is to say that journalism must situate phenomena into a broader historical, political, and social framework rather than reporting on them as though they occurred in a vacuum. Second, journalism’s “first loyalty is to citizens” (p. 5). Kovach and Rosenstiel stress that while journalists and journalism are answerable to many stakeholders, these loyalties are subordinate to the ultimate loyalty, which is to the citizenry. Third, journalism is “a discipline of verification” (p. 5). Journalists are called to test the validity and veracity of information rather than act as a conduit for every point of view. Fourth, the practitioners of journalism “must maintain an independence from those they cover” (p. 5), a guideline that incorporates all who work in the journalistic field, from hard news reporters to opinion columnists, who must be free

of loyalty to any social group, organization, or institution. Fifth, journalism “must serve as an independent monitor of power” (p. 5). This is the watchdog function of journalism that maintains that journalism’s role is to speak truth to power and protect the interests of the public. Sixth, journalism “must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise” (p. 6). They stress that journalism must represent the varied viewpoints that exist in a pluralistic society, but steer free of a myopic focus on the conflicting margins. Seventh, journalism must make news “interesting and relevant” (p. 6). Journalism does not exist simply to “give the public what it wants,” so to speak, but to broaden its horizons and serve as an educational tool. Eighth, journalism “must keep the news comprehensive and in proportion” (p. 6). Rather than a form of *stenography*, journalism is “our modern *cartography*” (p. 208, my emphasis). In other words, journalism exists to provide a map that allows citizens to navigate the shifting, often stormy waters of society and understand the complexities of life in a pluralistic western democracy. Ninth, journalism’s practitioners “have an obligation to exercise their personal conscience” (p. 6). Journalists, for Kovach and Rosenstiel, are moral agents possessing “a personal sense of ethics and responsibility” (p. 231).

In their treatise, Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) demonstrate how journalism is an important social institution that bears important social responsibilities. Their arguments have been echoed by other scholars. For Schudson (2008), journalism has six functions: information, investigation, analysis, surveillance, acting as a public forum, and mobilization. Meanwhile, McNair (1995), writing to a British audience, has suggested five: informing citizens of current events; educating them as to the significance of these events, facilitating the formation of public opinion through providing space for political discourse, holding the political system accountable for its actions, and providing a channel for various political viewpoints to exercise persuasion (pp. 21-22). The 1947-1949 Royal Commission on the Press, commissioned as a result of a crisis

in public confidence in media ethics, posited that a “democratic society needs a clear and truthful account of events, of their background and causes; a forum for discussion and informed criticism; and a means whereby individuals and groups can express a point of view or advocate a cause” (Royal Commission on the Press, 1949, pp. 100-101).

Seib (2002) has argued that “the job of the news media” in a complex, diverse world riddled with social conflict, “is not to try to solve all the world’s problems, but to shake awake the world’s conscience” (p. *xiv*). In other words, the news media must take an active role in the righting of wrongs and the correction of social injustices, not by direct activism but by calling the public’s attention to the ills that are around them. For Seib, “the fact that news can make a difference in people’s lives” necessitates “a moral mandate that journalists and news consumers should recognize” (p. 3). Expanding upon this, Richardson (2007) has argued that journalism “exists to enable citizens to better understand their lives and their position(s) in the world” (p. 7), while McNair (2009) has described journalism as the public’s “key point of contact with the political process” (p. 30). For Altschull (1985),

[i]n a democracy, it is the people who rule. The voice of the people is heard in the voting booth. The decisions made by the people in the voting booth are based on the information made available to them. That information is provided primarily by the news media.

Hence the news media are indispensable to the survival of democracy (p. 19).

In other words, the public depend on journalism to draw them into a world beyond their immediate sphere and provide them with the information that they need to make informed decisions that will afford them the opportunity to live a fulfilling life.

## **Journalism and the Public**

Journalism is an important social institution. Through it, the public is able to comprehend the magnitude of society, gain insight into worlds far beyond their reach and imagination, grasp the import of the issues that confront them as members of society, and understand society and their place in it. A matter as critical to the workings of a capitalist society as the relationship between capital and labor (particularly when it breaks down) will inevitably find expression in the pages of newspapers; those newspapers are read by audiences who gain knowledge and insight that they would not otherwise have been exposed to and can thus develop opinions on these matters. Two theorists who have addressed the matter of the relationship between journalism and the public are John Dewey and Jürgen Habermas and their contribution should be examined.

### **Dewey, the public, and its problems**

In the 1920s, two prominent American commentators and intellectuals – Walter Lippmann and John Dewey – used the pages of their books to debate the role of journalism in a democracy. While Lippmann and Dewey were addressing an American audience, their arguments extend to journalism as practiced in democratic societies broadly. Lippmann (1920, 1922, 1927) believed that journalism must mediate between stratified social groups, namely the public and policymakers. Under Lippmann’s framework, journalists act as decoders, translating and sorting through complex data and putting it into language the public can understand. Lippmann believed that the public are easily overwhelmed by the magnitude of the social landscape and require journalists to put this information into a meaningful order. Public opinion, for Lippmann, emerges out of the mediation process, within which journalists and commentators play a pivotal

role. According to Lippmann, the public cannot be relied upon to be rational participants in civic discourse.

On the other hand, Dewey (1927/1991) maintained that the public was quite capable of understanding the key issues facing society, believing that it was in the public forum – an arena of debate and dialogue – that consensus was generated. Dewey’s key concern was how democracy could be exercised in a changing society where the fruits of capitalism often made the practice of democracy difficult. Dewey defined the public under capitalism as a construct that came into being when citizens experienced what he called “negative externalities,” namely events beyond their control (such as an economic or political crisis). A “public” spontaneously comes together to find resolution to the negative externality. According to Dewey, publics do not “exist” in perpetuity but are instead called into being by forces beyond their control and minded toward a specific purpose. As a result of capitalism and the technological innovations it brought about, Dewey argued that society was awash with distractions seeking to take the minds of the polity away from serious matters and toward inconsequential trivia. However, Dewey had much greater faith in the capacity of the public to manage complexity than Lippmann did, and believed that journalists fulfill a broader purpose than that of a mere translator. The goal of journalism, under Dewey’s framework, is not to simply report on happenings in rote, static fashion but provide audiences with an understanding of the alternatives, consequences, and possibilities in a democratic society, which ultimately stimulates conversation and in so doing creates community. This is critical to the flourishing of democracy, for “the clear consciousness of a communal life, in all its implications, constitutes the idea of democracy” (Dewey, 1927/1991, p. 149). With improved communication, civic life is enriched and the public can become more cohesive, for “communication alone can create a great community” (p. 142). The sole reason for the press’

existence, under Dewey's formation, is to help democracy flourish, and for that reason it plays a critical role.

The Lippmann-Dewey debates provide two competing frameworks to understanding journalism. Lippmann adopted a pessimistic approach to the engagement of citizens in the democratic process, believing that citizens need to be "spoon-fed" information in easy-to-consume chunks, being incapable of grasping complex, controversial, and multi-faceted ideas. Dewey, on the other hand, was much more optimistic regarding the public's capacity for complex thought and possessed much greater faith in the potential of journalism as an agent of social change. Following Dewey, James Carey (1989) argued that journalism exists to bring the public into a community of shared values, while Eldridge (1993) argued that an informed polity is "a prerequisite for a mature democracy" and therefore the news media "have a decisive role to play in this respect" (p. 20). When citizens are provided with truthful and complete information, they are empowered to make decisions that benefit them. Inasmuch as the institution of journalism provides citizens with full and accurate information about matters of public concern, democracy is enriched; inasmuch as it does not, democracy suffers. Dewey provides us with a model of democracy that is positive and assumes the best of the public.

### **Habermas and the public sphere**

Another important contribution to the relationship between the media and the public comes from Jürgen Habermas and his theory of the public sphere, which is, according to Gitlin (1998), "the God-term of democratic discourse theory" (p. 168). The public sphere can best be described as "a discursive space in which individuals and groups congregate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment" (Hauser, 1998, p. 86). It is discursive inasmuch as there is no fixed material definition of what comprises a public sphere;



rather, it is brought into being by the gathering of people to deliberate over matters of public concern. The public sphere as a theoretical construct was developed by Habermas, whose seminal *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989) articulated what the public sphere is and how it came about. Habermas defined the public sphere as a distinct cluster of society operating between what he referred to as the “private sphere” (i.e., the non-social sphere such as the home) and the “sphere of public authority” (i.e., the sphere in which opinion does not “emerge” but is proscribed by legitimate state authority). The public sphere exists as a space where the issues of the day are mulled over by publics and public opinion is generated. It is geared toward political action, inasmuch as political action follows the concerns of the public.

The public sphere emerged in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries as a result of new printing technologies, rising literacy rates, and the development of public forums like salons and coffee houses (Habermas, 1989). Such changes saw a new space emerge that gave citizens the means, information, and locales necessary to deliberate over matters of social and political import. This was in contrast to the autocratic system of old, where power was represented *to* the people rather than granted *by* the people through open debate and its resultant consensus. For the first time, a space emerged where citizens could engage with the major political, economic, and social issues of the day and a genuinely organic popular consensus could emerge; it was the space where “private people come together as a public” (Habermas, 1989, p. 27). For the public sphere to flourish, it must be free from the control of systems of authority such as the state and the church and be a truly uninhibited space where ideas from across the political spectrum can be “freely expressed in a rational, universalistic, and inclusive form directed toward the public good” (Curran, 2004, p. 18). The public sphere is characterized by the disregard of social standing, equality of participation, and the quality of rational argument

(Habermas, 1989). This means that ideas are considered on their merits, where *all* are able to participate and *all* must be able to analyze rational arguments (and make rational arguments) to reach consensus. This is a prerequisite for a democracy, for “democratic governance rests on the capacity of, and opportunity for, citizens to engage in enlightened debate” (Hauser, 1998, p. 83).

This has radical implications for the role of the news media in society. With the abolition of state censorship and the use of new printing technologies, “the press was for the first time established as a genuinely critical organ of a public engaged in critical political debate” (Habermas, 1989, p. 51). The functions of the press outlined above took shape as a result of the development of the public sphere and the news media’s role in it. From this perspective, the press should “function as an instrument or a forum for the enlightened, rational, critical, and unbiased public discussion of what the common interests were in matters of culture and politics” (Gripsrud, 1992, p. 89). The news media play a key role in bringing disparate voices into an arena where the public could engage in debate on the great issues of the day. Journalism was thus “charged with the crucial role of ensuring that these individuals were able to draw upon a diverse spectrum of information sources to sustain their views, a responsibility which placed it at the center of public life” (Allan, 1997, p. 300). With such a burden on its shoulders, it is perhaps no wonder how “the mass media were heralded as the ultimate instruments of democracy... destined to unite, educate, and as a result, improve the actions and decisions of the polity” (Nimmo & Combs, 1992, p. xv).

Habermas saw the public sphere as fleeting, crushed by the commercialization of the mass media in the nineteenth century and the pernicious influence of advertising and public relations, which he believed to have fractured the public sphere and transformed it from a site of democratic engagement to one of passivity, manipulation, and consumption. Moreover,

economic disparities engendered by the capitalist system left an intellectually disenfranchised class of citizens lacking the social, cultural, and economic capital necessary to gain access to the public sphere. Under capitalism, public consensus no longer emerges organically through rational, democratic dialogue, but is pre-structured by elite interests and a media system that is more concerned with “making profit for [its] owners rather than acting as information providers for [its] readers” (Williams, 2003, pp. 68-69). The news media frame issues for the public, limiting the available possibilities and stifling innovation and radical thought. This represents the “re-feudalization” of the public sphere as debate is now managed by elites (Habermas, 1989, p. 195). According to Martin (2004), the public sphere was replaced with a “consumer sphere,” in which “public discourse and action is defined in terms of appropriate consumer behavior” (p. 5). This was a corruption of the ideals of the public sphere, as rational debate was replaced by the totalizing logic of the marketplace.

Scholars have criticized the notion of the public sphere for being idealistic and fixated on a fleeting moment in time where all was well, if indeed such a time existed at all (see, e.g., the criticisms raised in Calhoun, 1992 and Young, 2000). So why discuss it? It has remained popular in scholarly circles for the simple reason that it provides a vision of “what could be.” To debate whether or not the public sphere existed is, frankly, to miss the point. What matters is that it *could* exist and forces scholars to consider “the future of democratic politics” and the media’s role in shaping this future (Garnham, 1986, p. 43). For Schudson (1992), instead of resigning ourselves to what the marketplace can provide, the public sphere is “indispensable as a model of what a good society should achieve” (p. 160). The public sphere provides “an outline, however abstract, idealized, and historically questionable, of the press needed” for democratic communication to occur (Tunney, 2004, p. 3) Scholars must be able to map an alternative path

for journalism, and the public sphere is a model that provides a starting point from which media performance can be assessed, on the basis to which it shows fidelity to the public interest. In summation, McNair's (2000) assertion that "analysts and critics may dispute the extent to which Britain has a properly functioning 'public sphere' ... but all agree that such a space should exist, and that the media are at its core" (p. 1) is sound. This is an appropriate moment to turn to a discussion of the British press system and tabloid newspapers in particular.

### **The Press in Britain**

In their seminal study on international media systems, Siebert et al (1956) pointed out that the roles and responsibilities of journalism are both a product and reflection of the broader social *milieu*, for "the press always takes on the form and coloration of the social and political structures within which it operates" (p. 1). Though their work has been the subject of criticism and revision (see, e.g., Nerone, 1995; Nordenstreng, 2006; Ostini & Ostini, 2002), this simple proposition retains its explanatory power. For scholars who see society through a Marxist lens, this is a fundamental proposition. According to Sparks (2006), the media "produce and embody the dominant ideas of the age if a function of the kinds of social organizations that they are, and of the society within which they operate" (p. 113), while for Becker (1984), "to understand the operation of the mass media in a society, it is essential that each medium be considered both in its historical milieu and in the context of the socioeconomic structures and institutions in which it is embedded" (pp. 70-71). When viewed this way, the news media can be seen as both a product and reflection of the capitalist economic system.

Under capitalism, it is a simple and unarguable fact that newspapers must compete in a marketplace against other newspapers and other media institutions. Acknowledging this allows

for a nuanced view of the news media rather than adopting reductive arguments that see the media as propagandists of elite interests. Instead of focusing on media owners controlling what is written in newspapers, scholars should understand that “mechanisms of control are indirect and structural and derive from the economic priorities of a for-profit media system and the ways in which production is organized to meet this goal” (Kumar, 2004, p. 17). Journalism in a capitalist society must be economically viable. For Campbell (2004), the influence of material conditions on journalism is “absolutely unavoidable” because they fix the “boundaries of what journalists can print” (p. 28). Indeed, the notion of a marketplace of ideas hinges on the central conceit that ideas and information are akin to goods and services to be bought and sold and the merit of a “good idea” or “good information” can be measured in the same way one would assess the merit of consumer goods, as though journalism is the analog of a car, beverage, or home appliance. This becomes problematic if we understand that journalism is *not* analogous to consumer goods and the goals of profit and social responsibility are not naturally aligned, for commercialization “boost[s] profit... [but] interferes with a journalist’s or news organization’s best effort to maximize public understanding of those issues and events that shape the community they claim to serve” (McManus, 2009, p. 219). In other words, the commercialization of journalism impedes its public service mission. It is for this reason that Sparks (1999) has argued, somewhat provocatively, that a free press is “an impossibility in a free market” (p. 59) because of the constraints it places on journalism. For McNair (2005), while journalists enjoy ostensible independence they remain “determined in the last instance by the economic needs of capital, and the reproductive requirements of the capitalist mode of production viewed more broadly” (p. 152). They are torn between “professional commitment to ethics and truth-telling while at the same time being expendable employees expected to produce whatever stories are demanded in

the marketplace” (Harcup, 2002, p. 103). It is, in my view, an incontrovertible fact that the structure of the economic system places restraints on what can and cannot be covered, how it should be covered, how much time and space should be afforded it, and how much resources should be invested in it. *The question is whether or not this is ethically acceptable.*

### **The tabloids**

Like any business in a capitalist system, newspapers must generate profit. In order to accomplish this, they must be attractive to potential readers and in doing so serve as the conduit for advertising messages. This is particularly true of the British newspaper market, which is “the most obvious example of the way in which the pursuit of advertising revenue influences the nature of the media” (Sparks, 2006, p. 119). Because the products behind advertising messages are targeted towards particular audiences (as particular products can only be purchased by those with the necessary capital), readerships become ghettoized by social status. Within the British press system, the “broadsheet” or “quality” newspapers are the most expensive, information-loaded, and complex, possessing a readership that “tend[s] to occupy the higher socioeconomic and intellectual area of society” (Cole & Harcup, 2010, p. 31). Unlike the tabloids, which make the bulk of their revenue through sales, broadsheets generate profit through advertising and can survive significantly lower readerships. Broadsheets are designed “not to attract as many readers as possible but to attract particular kinds of readers,” in contrast to the tabloid press, which must “attract large numbers of readers, which in practice means working class readers” (Sparks, 2006, p. 120). Brands that wish to reach the largest audience possible advertise in tabloid newspapers, while brands that wish to target specialized audiences with larger quantities of disposable income advertise in the broadsheets.

In a market system, newspapers must carve a unique identity for themselves, meaning that the kinds of stories covered and stylistic conventions found in one newspaper will be distinct from the stories and conventions found in another. The wealthy and educated readership of the broadsheet newspapers makes them attractive to advertisers willing to pay high prices for advertising revenue. This allows the broadsheets to concentrate on issues that appeal to a relatively small but well-informed readership. The tabloids, on the other hand, have to prioritize material that will capture the greatest audience possible, which prompts them to turn to sensationalism and simplicity. Because tabloids are concerned with maintaining mass circulations, their reporting tends toward populism and standardization; offering a narrow slice of opinion that does not challenge conventional wisdom and ensures maximal audiences while possessing content that is unchallenging, in all senses of the term (Franklin, 1997; Rooney, 2000; Westergaard, 1977). Tabloids thus follow a “lowest common denominator” strategy when it comes to topic selection, detail, language, and layout (Tunstall, 1983, p. 78). It is therefore the very structure of the media system that gives rise to a form of journalism that does not advance the public interest; for Taylor (1992), “tabloid journalism is the direct application of capitalism to events and ideas. Profit, not ethics, is the prevailing motivation” (p. 409).

This is not to say that there will be an absence of dissenting voices. Sparks (2006) points to the occasional presence of left-wing voices like Tariq Ali, Paul Foot, and John Pilger in the pages of newspapers and on television screens in the 1980s and 1990s as evidence that journalism under capitalism is a contradictory process. However, these are rare occurrences rather than the norm and characteristic of what Sparks dubs the “limited diversity” (p. 112) of the British media. According to Sparks, readers should expect “diversity of views among the capitalist media, not uniformity” (p. 115) for the simple reason that media enterprises are in

competition with one another for readers. Though newspapers are capitalist-owned, it would not be good business sense of the tabloids were to “simply reproduce the capitalists’ own view of the world” (p. 116). Instead, they must present this view “in a form that will be palatable to people whose entire life is spent in conditions of exploitation and oppression that are the direct result of capitalism” (p. 116). According to Sparks, “if one acknowledges and confronts the problems and worries that the audience faces” and therefore allows “a certain amount of room to expressions of discontent or dissent,” a newspaper is simply applying “good economic sense” (pp. 116-117). In other words, tabloid newspapers must occasionally prevent alternative viewpoints in order to maintain profit. They must also “compete with personal experience” (p. 130) and find a way of reporting on events that acknowledges the reality of economic conditions among a waged readership structurally disadvantaged by a capitalist system but that also remains economically viable. Therefore, scholars analyzing tabloid newspaper representations must be mindful of how newspapers acknowledge this economically subordinate position while also supporting a capitalist system.

### **Origin of [a] species: The emergence of the tabloid press**

The story of the British press is synonymous with the story of industrialization and the rises in literacy it wrought (McNair, 2009). Indeed, for as long as there has been journalism, there have been outlets catered toward working class audiences. According to Schiller (1981), the emergence of the penny press in the United Kingdom, as in the United States, gave “all citizens an equal access to knowledge and direct personal knowledge of impartially presented news” and reflected the view that “knowledge, like property, should not be monopolized for exclusive use by private interests” (p. 48). The penny press saw journalists adopt the role of spokesmen for “egalitarian ideals in politics, economic, and social life” (Schudson, 1978, p. 60).



From the very onset of news media for mass audiences, there was a tension between public interest and commercial models of journalism; Hartley (1992) has described this as the tension between the “radical populars” that focused on important social issues and brought radical ideas into the mainstream and the “commercial populars” which focused on the salacious scandals of the age (pp. 177-181).

From the 1920s to the 1950s, British mainstream newspapers actively pursued working class audiences, with newspaper readerships becoming heavily stratified along socioeconomic lines (Conboy, 2004). One consequence of this was the demise of several left-wing publications, such as the *Daily Herald*, *News Chronicle*, and *Sunday Citizen*, all of which died out because of advertiser pressure (Curran & Seaton, 2010). As the market became increasingly segmented along class lines, so the tone and content of the newspapers changed to fit their target audience. Whereas earlier tabloids had concentrated on providing edification and enlightenment for the working class, now they focused on diversions and inanities (Curran, 1978; Williams, 1970). This represented the difference between the journalism of analysis and the journalism of entertainment, with the former offering high-minded scrutiny of the day’s events in contexts and the latter offering distraction and diversion (Schudson, 1978).

The last quarter of the twentieth century was characterized by scholars as the era of “tabloidization,” where tabloid standards and ethics (or lack thereof) have bled across the media landscape, affecting broadsheets and broadcasters alike (Gripsrud, 2000; Tulloch, 2000). Such an era is noteworthy for the “lowering of journalistic standards,” a process which “ultimately undermines the ideal functions of mass media in liberal democracies” (Gripsrud, 2000, p. 285). Scholars have argued that the lack of coverage afforded political and economic affairs in tabloid newspapers have led to a knowledge gap between the information-rich and the information-poor

in British society, which closely follows class lines (Dahlgren, 1995; Franklin, 1997; McLachlan & Golding, 2000; Rooney, 2000). This is obviously a matter of concern, for

it is not simply that tabloids and tabloidization constitute a threat to an existing democracy; rather they make its practical functioning an impossibility because they are unable to provide the audience with the kinds of knowledge that are essential to the exercise of their rights as citizens (Sparks, 2000, p. 28).

In other words, tabloid newspapers constitute a serious impediment to the workings of a democracy because their distortions and diversions lessen the ability of the working class to become politically-minded and able to act and vote in their own interests.

### **The Charge of Paternalism**

The danger of criticizing tabloid journalism is that it may lead to the accusation that the scholar is behaving paternalistically, complaining about the masses who “don’t know what’s good for them.” Lippmann (1927) raised this charge directly:

It was believed that if only he could be taught more facts, if only he would take more interest, if only he would listen to more lectures and read more reports, he would gradually be trained to direct public affairs. The whole assumption is false (p. 136)

This is a cynical view of the public, but Lippmann raises a legitimate concern. When scholars criticize the ethics, values, and quality of tabloid newspapers, the response can easily be to suggest that said scholars are elitist and scornful of popular opinion, an argument raised by Hartley (2009):

The problem remains as it was in the beginning, when the pauper press attracted readers with rapes, murders, and pugilism in order to hold them for radical reform. How do you

get uncommitted ordinary people... to take an interest in things they do not know or care about? How can you impart information to the public if they do not pay attention to you? (p. 316).

In other words, what if working class audiences buy tabloid newspapers because they are the best judge of what is best for their own lives and, for whatever reason, get pleasure or fulfillment out of reading them? Who is the scholar to pontificate about what is best for these people's lives? This is a compelling narrative, one that poststructuralist scholars have given a significant amount of credence to. For example, John Fiske has argued that tabloids carry "utopianized fantasies of emancipation from the constraints of poverty and perceived social failure" (1992, p. 50) and whose popularity is "evidence of the extent of dissatisfaction in a society, particularly among those who feel powerless to change their situation" (1989, p. 117). Given the pleasure derived from the consumption of tabloid newspapers, and the fact that readers are best placed to make decisions for their own lives, should scholars simply just allow members of the public to "vote with their wallets," so to speak?

I believe this is an inadequate response that trivializes the issue. Scholars have maintained that under a capitalist press structure, it is not at all the case that the news media are giving the public what they want but instead giving *advertisers* what they want (Bogart, 2000; McChesney, 1999). Moreover, the public can only value what they are offered (Baker, 2002), so the notion of "voting with your wallet" is highly spurious. With regard to the content of the newspapers, working class audiences are poorly served by newspapers that do not enlighten and educate. Where coverage of important events is absent, partial, or misleading, their ability to participate in a democracy is diminished. Wealthier citizens have more information sources to draw on as a result of their economic, social, and cultural capital and thus have a structural

advantage in this regard (McChesney, 1999; McManus, 1992). Fiske's celebration of tabloids may be stridently populist but it is also ethically relativistic, celebrating escapism instead of asking precisely why escape is necessary or how working class audiences are supposed to get the information that will be of use to them to change their social situation so they do not have to escape. Indeed, Blumler and Gurevitch (1995) have blamed tabloid newspapers for the alienation of working class people from the political system due to them becoming cynical about politics.

In 1957, the British cultural critic Richard Hoggart published *The Uses of Literacy*, a seminal text that, along with Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society* (1958) and E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) founded the academic discipline of cultural studies (Munt, 2000). In it, Hoggart, who came from a working class background, examined working class life at a time of mass culture, which he saw as a threat to traditional working class bonds and traditions. Hoggart tackled the charge of paternalism directly, stating that "to wish that a majority of the population will ever read *The Times* is to wish that human beings were constitutionally different, and is to fall into an intellectual snobbery" (Hoggart, 1957, p. 276). Hoggart argued that rather than wish that the working class read broadsheet newspapers, scholars should acknowledge that different social classes have different reading habits. The crucial distinction for Hoggart is this does *not* mean that the working class must automatically settle for an inferior product simply because of their social standing. Instead, they are entitled to expect information that is of high quality and maintains the highest standard of professional ethics.

Taking aim at the tabloid newspapers of the day, which he describes as "slicked-up extensions... of nineteenth century sensationalism" (p. 276), Hoggart stated that his "strongest objection" to these increasingly popular and powerful institutions "is not that they prevent their

readers from becoming highbrow, but that they make it harder for people without an intellectual bent *to become wise in their own way*” (p. 276, my emphasis). Hoggart bemoaned how tabloid newspapers “make their audience less likely to arrive at a wisdom derived from an inner, felt discrimination in their sense of people and their attitude to experience” (p. 277), denouncing them for offering “nothing which can really grip the brain or heart” (p. 277). In other words, working class audiences are as much entitled to intellectual fulfillment as other classes, and publications designed for a working class audience must speak to the working class experience and steer clear of both patronizing *and* pandering to this audience. They can use working class language and tropes, certainly, but must not be absolved of journalism’s fundamental mission to enlighten and explain and help working class citizens find their way through society. Though they are perhaps an atypical pairing, Hoggart’s arguments are closely aligned with Dewey’s, who, importantly, makes no distinction between social groups and classes, maintaining that all citizens, regardless of social standing, have the right to information and are capable of unpacking complexity, if provided the correct tools.

Scholars like Dewey, Habermas, and Hoggart provide a theoretical (and, indeed, ethical) basis from which to assess the fidelity of the British tabloid press to the public good and whether it draws citizens into a community of knowledge or puts barriers in the way of democratic engagement. From Habermas we get “a powerful and arresting vision of the role of the media in a democratic society” (Curran, 1996, p. 82). Dewey shows us how communication is central to democracy. Via Hoggart, scholars are equipped with the vocabulary to critique media organizations that purport to be on the side of the working class but do little to advance the position of the working class and, in fact, inhibit its intellectual flourishing.

## **The Litmus Test for Journalism**

In one of his earliest writings on the media, Stuart Hall (1973) recommended that scholars concerned with the media keep two questions at the forefront of their minds: “Can the media help us to understand... significant real events in the real world? Do the media clarify them or mystify us about them?” (pp. 90-91). Where the media “clarify,” they reinforce democracy and empower citizens to make decisions for themselves. Where the media “mystify,” they impede the workings of democracy by feeding citizens a steady diet of inaccuracy and diversion. Scholars concerned with the media’s role in the maintenance of social relations must be minded toward media output that clarifies rather than mystifies, and must understand this as the litmus test for journalism across all contexts, including coverage of organized labor.

It is imperative that scholars do not lose sight of the democratic potential of journalism and the important role it plays in drawing citizens into the debates on the great issues of the day and in doing so help them navigate their way through a frenetic and seemingly chaotic world, providing order, organization, and significance to occurrences, whether local, national, or global. Richardson (n.d.) encourages scholars to move beyond a perspective that sees the news media as the elites’ very own printing press, propagandists for capital who take delight in keeping the masses downtrodden. As a journalism educator, Richardson offers the deceptively simple argument that while his journalism students possessed “differing reasons for entering into journalism, not one entered into the profession to disseminate ruling class ideology. Most wanted to help inform the public, to educate, to play a role in the democratic system” (¶2). Journalism “remains an honorable profession, because it has an honorable aim, the circulation of information” (Belsey & Chadwick, 1992, p. 1). Yet it is simultaneously “the site of complex and often contradictory processes” (Fairclough, 1995b, p. 47), and journalistic texts emerge “from a

dynamic that is shaped by a number of competing forces of differing strengths and directions” (Iggers, 1999, p. 100). Scholars concerned with news media discourse must acknowledge these issues in their analyses.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed the normative role of journalism in a democratic society, drawing on contributions from John Dewey, Jürgen Habermas, and Richard Hoggart to explore the relationship between journalism and the public, and working class audiences in particular. The chapter has underlined a key assumption of this study, that journalism serves particular responsibilities in society. The chapter then discussed the material properties of the British tabloid press, pointing out how the capitalist marketplace puts into place a structure that defines the possibilities of particular newspapers in a market system. Having established the material properties of journalism, the next chapter examines its discursive properties, through the lens of critical discourse analysis.

## CHAPTER THREE

### DISCOURSE, IDEOLOGY, AND HEGEMONY

Scholars who study journalism hail from a number of theoretical traditions and use a variety of methods to understand the role of journalism in society. The choice that a scholar makes regarding how he or she studies journalism is a reflection of fundamental assumptions he or she holds regarding society and how it should be investigated (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). This study approaches journalism using critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA has been said by its advocates to be both a *theory* and a *method* of textual analysis (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999; Fairclough, 1995a, 1995b; Gee, 2005; Richardson, 2007). It is a *theory* because it is structured around a set of ontological and epistemological assumptions about the nature of reality and how it should be investigated, and it is a *method* because it provides a framework, if not a prescription, for how texts should be analyzed. The purpose of this chapter is to outline the theoretical principles of CDA, examining the notion of being “critical” and unpacking the term “discourse” (Chapter Five focuses on CDA’s methodological principles). It examines the concepts of ideology and hegemony, key concerns of CDA, and how they pertain to news media discourse. The chapter examines the discursive conventions of the British tabloid press before closing with an argument summarizing the utility of ideology to contemporary analyses of mass communication.

#### Being “Critical”

When communication scholars describes themselves as being “critical” or belonging to the “critical tradition” or “critical paradigm,” they are asserting their concern for power relations



in society and how they are articulated and maintained, and indicating an epistemologically subjective stance when it comes to how the social world can, and should, be investigated. Critical scholarship “exposes hidden social mechanisms that distort communication and supports political efforts to resist the power of those mechanisms” (Craig & Muller, 2007, p. 425). It is therefore minded toward social change and the bringing forth of a more egalitarian society. Specifically, CDA scholars are concerned with “social problems... especially the role of discourse in the production and reproduction of power abuse or domination” (van Dijk, 2001, p. 96). What distinguishes *critical* discourse analysts from discourse analysts is a concern for inequitable power relations; while discourse analysts examine patterns of social interaction, critical discourse analysts “treat social practices not just in terms of their social relationships... [but] in terms of their implications for things like status, solidarity, distribution of social goods, and power” (Gee, 2004, p. 33). CDA scholars look for the often opaque linkages between texts and their broader political, economic, and social contexts; in other words, they examine the linkage between discourse and social relations and attempt to understand how discourse reproduces inequitable social relations (Fairclough, 2001; Woods & Kroger, 2000).

CDA takes an avowedly political stance toward scholarship, intending to generate “research that contributes to the rectification of injustice and inequality in society” (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 77). CDA theorists maintain that domination and inequity continue if left unchallenged; to the extent that it is concerned with social change and the transformation of social relations, CDA can be described as a profoundly teleological approach to scholarship. For Fairclough (2003), the aim of CDA is “a better understanding of how societies work and produce both beneficial and detrimental effects, and of how the detrimental effects can be mitigated if not eliminated” (pp. 202-203). CDA scholars do not doubt the difficulty of transforming these social

relations – if anything, through analyzing how discourse embeds ideological configurations, CDA scholars should be all too aware of how arduous a project this would be. However, the point is that the CDA scholar sees it as their role to nonetheless *try*. Specifically, the project of CDA is to raise awareness of the role of “language as a factor in domination” (Fairclough, 1995a, p. 186) and nurture a critical consciousness in the polity that will empower citizens to sift through falsehood and distraction and understand the workings of ideology, so that they may better function in democratic society.

### **Defining “Discourse”**

“Discourse” is a notoriously difficult term to define (Henry & Tator, 2002). Richardson (2007) described discourse as “a very trendy concept... one of the most well-used (some would say *over-* or *misused*) words in academia today” (p. 21, emphasis in original). It is important to be clear in articulating what one actually means when one uses the term. In particular, what is the role of discourse in constituting our worldview? What is the relationship between discourse and the material or “physical” world? In their seminal work on the philosophy of science, Burrell and Morgan (1979) wrote that one of the key assumptions scholars bring to their research is that of *ontology*, which asks if there is an empirical, “concrete” reality that exists independent of our engagement with it, or if reality is subjective, socially constructed, and a product of individual consciousness. This is by no means a recent debate and speaks to a centuries-old philosophical dilemma. On the one hand, Hegelian idealism took the view that it was ideas that determined material reality; in other words, “social consciousness is taken to determine social being” (Richardson, 2007, p. 27). In 1796, the philosopher Antoine Destutt de Tracy coined the phrase “idea-logy” to describe a “new science of ideas,” positioning thought and ideas at the

fulcrum of social structure and social change. For McLellan (1986), German Idealism is characterized by the belief “that human beings collectively and individually created their own reality in response to changing circumstances” (p. 7). Humans are authors of their own reality, in other words, and it is ideas – expressed through language – that drive social change and give shape to social structure.

A materialist approach turns the idealist position on its head. Materialism is best associated with the work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who argued that power was grounded in ownership of the means of production (what they called the *base*). If one possesses control over the base, one also controlled culture, religion, education, the arts, and the news media (what they called the *superstructure*). In other words, “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (Marx & Engels, 1845/1970, p. 64), because it is the ruling class that controls the means of production. This forms the root of the Marxist notion of historical materialism, which sees social relations as structured through one’s economic position. This was a break with the Hegelianism with which Marx had previously been associated (Coser, 1977). To quote Marx (1859/1978):

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely [the] relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond definite forms of consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men

that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness (p. 4).

In other words, a material reality exists independent of our engagement with it, and this material reality wields great power in structuring social relations. Ideas, thought, and language are all important aspects of a Marxist understanding of society, but they are understood to be subservient to an economic base inasmuch as it is the base that frames the terrain upon which ideas, thought, and language may operate. Indeed, contrary to misconception, Marx and Engels did not argue that this is a causal relationship and recognized that the superstructure could, at times, influence the base. Instead they argued for the predominance of the base, not its exclusivity, in imposing limits, closing off options and possibilities, and placing pressure on the superstructure (Williams, 1973).

### **The ontology of critical discourse analysis**

Where does CDA fit into this puzzle? Jorgensen and Phillips (2002) outline three variants of CDA. One is the “discursive psychology” approach of Teun van Dijk, which focuses on “how people use the available discourses flexibly in creating and negotiating representations of the world” (p. 7). Van Dijk’s approach draws heavily from social psychology, cognitive studies, linguistics, and poststructuralist philosophy. Though van Dijk is widely published in the field, his work is of less concern here as it does not explicitly address the idealist/materialist tension.

The second framework offered by Jorgensen and Phillips is “discourse theory,” which hails chiefly from the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985, 1987). Laclau and Mouffe were writing at a time of great change in the political and intellectual arenas. On the one hand, the failure of student movements in the 1960s and the failure of Communism in the Soviet Union saw a political left that was in crisis by the 1980s, countered by a resurgent political right

(Sims, 2000; Therborn, 2010). Concurrently, the social sciences and humanities were transformed by the emergence of poststructuralism and its architects Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Francois Lyotard, who attacked the old certainties of Marxist thought by insisting on a focus on language and determinedly pivoted away from economics and materiality (Sims, 2000; Therborn, 2010). Poststructuralist scholars such as Laclau and Mouffe argued that language is lacking in fixity. In other words, there is no such thing as an objective, material reality – only our understanding of that reality, which is mediated through discourse (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002). According to D’Amico (1992), Laclau and Mouffe and their poststructuralist forerunners offer an “anti-realist account of knowledge,” as they treat “representation, correspondence, and reference as dependent on a conceptual framework or scheme” (p. 142). This position holds that “there are no objective laws that divide society into particular groups; the groups that exist are always created in political, discursive processes” (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 33). For Richardson (2007), “the dominant approach in CDA has been to separate language use from language users to treat discourse as a thing that *in itself* can include or exclude, reproduce social inequalities or effect social change” (p. 28). The problem with this notion is that placing discourse at the heart of power relations is to misunderstand how some groups are unable to shift the tectonics of power relations due to their disempowered social status stemming from a lack of material resources, most notably capital (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). Responding to this all-too-cavalier trend in scholarship, Cloud (2006) has asked: “If we and our knowledge of ourselves are constituted in the discourses around us, on what basis can we act in our own interests?” (p. 332).

The third approach listed by Jorgensen and Phillips (2002), and the one this study is most comfortable with, is the approach of Norman Fairclough, who is widely published in the field of

CDA (see, e.g., Fairclough 1992, 1993, 1995a, 1995b, 2000a, 2000b, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2009). Fairclough's approach "places weight on the active role of discourse in constructing the social world" but "insists that discourse is just one among many aspects of any social practice" (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 7). Fairclough (2001) has maintained that power is not just a matter of language, and it is imperative that it is not seen as such:

There is always a danger, in focusing upon one aspect of a social relation or process, of being tempted to reduce it to that aspect alone, especially if as in this case it is a neglected aspect. Power exists in various modalities, including the concrete and unmistakable modality of physical force (p. 3).

Fairclough (2003) sees discourse as a form of social practice that works in duality with material forces to structure social relations, where "social relations" are conceptualized as "being partly discursive in nature [and] discourse as partly social relations" (p. 48). In other words, they are engaged in ongoing dialectical tension.

Fairclough's arguments are similar to those of the cultural theorist Stuart Hall, who rejected the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe:

Every social practice is constituted within the interplay of meaning and representation and can itself be represented. In other words, there is no social practice outside of ideology. However, this does not mean that, because all social practices are within the discursive, there is nothing to social practice but discourse... Social relations do exist. We are born into them. They exist independently of our will. They are real in their structure and tendency. We cannot develop a social practice without representing those conditions to ourselves in some way or another; but the representations do not exhaust

their effect. Social relations exist, independent of mind, independent of thought. And yet they can only be conceptualized in thought, in the head (Hall, 1985, pp. 103-105).

Discourse alone *cannot* change society; language can hurt, persuade, shame, or praise, but the actions that correspond to these transformations in consciousness are conducted by people, who operate in the material world to change conditions. Hall (1988a) writes that “all discourse has conditions of existence” (p. 10), which calls to mind Marx’s famous maxim that “men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under circumstances of their own choosing, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past” (1852/1972, p. 437). In other words, reality exists independent of our awareness of it and consists of a series of overlapping structures that stratify social relations. These underlying structures frame the possibilities within which phenomena become possible. Thus, “whether we like it or not, at individual, community, and societal levels, everything we believe and everything we do is influenced by our place in an economic and social order” (Nesbit, 2006, p. 172).

This is important for mass communication scholars who are concerned with the way “texts” such as newspaper articles and social structure interface. A number of scholars have rejected poststructuralism’s denial of material reality (Richardson, 2007; Turner, 2000; Zelizer, 2004). These scholars do not deny the social constructionist role that journalists fulfill but posit that there must be a material reality to be represented. The very nature of journalism is the *representation* of material phenomena; in other words, something must have *happened* for it to be reported on. For Richardson (2007), all discourse “is produced in social interaction, is part of a social structure and context, and hence is socio-politically situated whether we like it or not” (p. 2). For mass communication scholars, the question revolves around what role mediated discourse plays in the *reproduction* of social structures.

## Assumptions regarding discourse

Fairclough's approach to discourse has been influential among scholars concerned with news media representations. Richardson (2007, pp. 10-14) has outlined five key assumptions regarding discourse that can be drawn from this ontological position. First, that discourse is *social*. Humans are social creatures and our interaction with one another, whether face-to-face, in a small group, within an organization, or mediated through technology, is predicated on communication. Discourse is tied to the process of meaning-making and "grant[s] meaning to our actions" (p. 10). Through language people "contribute to the production and reproduction of social reality" (p. 10). Thus, discourse not only *reflects* reality but also *constructs* it. It follows that discourse "must play a part in producing and reproducing social inequalities" (p. 26). Richardson's second assumption is that discourse *enacts identity*; for journalism studies, it follows that newspapers in a market economy must create a particular identity in order to market itself to a particular audience. Richardson's third assumption is that discourse is *active*: "language use is not just talk" but is always in the process of "doing something" (p. 12). For example, a student pleads with a professor for a better grade; an advertiser attempts to persuade audiences to part with their money; a journalist informs the public of wrongdoing in government; a politician insists he is "not a crook," and so on. Fourth, discourse has *power*. Through discourse, the public come to understand "reality" and how it ought (and ought not) to appear. The power of journalism as a discursive medium is precisely because of its capability to have social effects:

Through its power to shape issue agendas and public discourse, [journalism] can reinforce beliefs; it can shape people's opinions not only of the world but also of their place and role in the world; or, if not shape your opinions on a particular matter, it can at



the very least influence what you have opinions on; in sum, it can help shape social reality by shaping our views of social reality (p. 13).

Discourse can make inequitable power relations appear to be a normal, natural part of everyday life. Finally, discourse is *political*. CDA scholars contend that language can never be neutral or apolitical. To believe in the neutrality of language is “dangerous” (Richardson, 2007, p. 13) as its taken-for-grantedness enables the sedimentation of “inequalities of power” (p. 14).

### **Ideology**

The concept of ideology is central to CDA. “Ideology” is complex, and there has never been a fixed, stable definition of the term (Williams, 1976). Though the term “ideology” originates from, as noted above, Antoine Destutt de Tracey, today it is perhaps best known through its association with Karl Marx and subsequent Marxist philosophers. Marx and Engels developed the theory of ideology in “*The German Ideology*” in 1845 to explain how capitalism was maintained despite its manifestly inequitable nature. The classic Marxist theory of ideology denotes sets of ideas that function to obscure the contradictions of a class society, where the superstructure works to perpetuate the exploitative social relations that exist under capitalism by naturalizing its exploitative nature. Ideology, then, is more than simply “ideas” or ways of thinking about the world, but a systematized worldview anchored in relations of production, developing “through the process of social interaction [and] defined by the social purview of the given time period and the given social group,” to quote the Marxist philosopher and linguist Valentin Volosinov (1929/1973, p. 21). The function of ideology, according to classic Marxist thought, is the “reconciling [of] the exploited to their exploitation” (Heywood, 1999, p. 146).

For CDA scholars, ideology is a central concept. According to Thompson (1990), “when our concern is with the analysis of ideology, then the role of interpretation is to explicate the connection between the meaning of symbolic constructions and the relations of domination which that meaning serves to sustain” (p. 372). For Fairclough (2001),

[i]deologies are closely linked to power, because the nature of the ideological assumptions embedded in particular conventions, and so the nature of those conventions themselves, depends on the power relations which underlie the conventions; and because they are a means of legitimizing existing social relations and differences of power, simply through the recurrence of ordinary, familiar ways of behaving which take these relations and power differences for granted (p. 2).

According to Fairclough (2001), ideology is “most effective when its workings are least visible” (p. 71). This raises the question of how ideology attains popular support. Antonio Gramsci and his theory of hegemony provide a resolution.

### **Gramsci and Hegemony**

Antonio Gramsci developed his theory of hegemony as an attempt to explain why the Italian proletariat never revolted against the oppressive system of economic relations they were positioned in. As a former leader of the Italian Communist Party, Gramsci was concerned as to why the Italian working class did not revolt but instead supported the fascist dictator Benito Mussolini (Bates, 1975). Why did the “inevitable” revolution predicted by Marx not transpire? According to Gramsci, hegemony is the process through which the ruling class convinces other classes to see their worldviews as aligned. In other words, it is a mechanism through which the subordinate classes accept the ideas of the ruling class as though they benefit them. It is a way of

understanding how societies function through consent rather than the use of force; it is “leadership rather than domination” (Cox, 2004, p. 311). Class power, understood through a Gramscian lens, lies in the ability of the dominant class to project a worldview that is accepted by those in subordinate positions as a natural state of affairs, a form of “common sense” that prompts the proletariat see the values of the bourgeoisie as their own, when in fact those values are quite different (Gramsci, 1971). Hegemony can only function with the consent of the proletariat:

Legitimization and acceptance of the ruling ideology as common sense or natural is one of the key goals of ruling groups. The ruling groups’ ideology becomes hegemonic when it is widely accepted as describing the way things are, inducing people to consent to the institutions and practices dominant in their society and its way of life (Kellner, 1990, p. 17).

Hegemony is accomplished through various actors in civil society, including the family, the church, and the news media, all of which work to maintain the power of a particular social order. This is *not* to say that these institutions work to consciously indoctrinate – a point Gramsci emphatically rejects – but rather to frame the terrain of what is “common sense,” or, in other words, what is (and is not) possible. Through hegemony, particular perspectives, ideas, or arguments achieve legitimacy while others are frozen out of the mainstream.

Gramsci (1971) did not believe that the dominance of one class over another was ever final or complete, arguing that “common sense is not something rigid and immobile, but is continually transforming itself” (p. 326). This is central to the notion that culture is a *site of struggle over meaning*. There is always space for oppositional ideas to challenge hegemony by winning popular consent for a program or platform that speaks to the lived experience or

“common sense” of the subordinate class. Hegemony is something that must continually be worked for and buttressed, and is never “a permanent state of affairs” (Hall, 1977, p. 333).

According to Hall,

It is precisely its “spontaneous” quality, its transparency, its “naturalness,” its refusal to be made to examine the premises on which it is founded, its resistance to change or to correction, its effect of instant recognition, and the closed circle in which it moves which makes common sense, at one and the same time, “spontaneous,” ideological *and unconscious*. You cannot learn, through common sense, *how things are*: you can only discover *where they fit* into the existing scheme of things (p. 325, emphasis in original).

CDA theorists use the concept of hegemony to provide “the means by which to analyze how discursive practice is part of a larger social practice involving power relations” (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 76). The classic Gramscian notion of hegemony looks holistically at social structure in an effort to understand how particular ideological perspectives come to dominance while others do not. To quote Fairclough (1995a), “the concept of hegemony implies the development in various domains of civil society... of practices which naturalize particular relations and ideologies, practices which are largely discursive” (p. 94). As noted above, the news media play a key role in the maintenance of hegemony. Indeed, for Gitlin (1980), the news media are a “core system for the distribution of ideology” and the maintenance of existing power relations (p. 2). It is to journalism that I now turn, so that we can better understand the role of the news media in maintaining dominant ideologies.

## **Journalism and the Social Construction of Reality**

When one writes of the media's role in the maintenance of dominant ideologies, one must be cautious about conspiracy theory-esque notions of wealthy white men in boardrooms dictating what goes on the front page of the newspaper. While the possibility of direct intervention by owners in the affairs of their newspapers should not be wholly discounted, "the part played by the media in cementing the consensus in capitalist society is only occasionally characterized by overt suppression or deliberate distortion" (Murdock & Golding, 1974, p. 228). Instead, scholars' primary concern should be for the "structural and functional properties of the news-gathering and reporting process" (Verschueren, 1985, p. vii) that give rise to representations that reinforce dominant worldviews and marginalize others. Accepting a Marxist reading of society does not mean that one consequently accepts that the news media are the elite's very own printing press. Rather, it means understanding that "the ruling ideas are by and large compatible with or at least do not openly confront the ideas or... interests of the ruling class" (Wayne, 2003, p. 135). Of course, in a capitalist system it would make little sense for mainstream newspapers to challenge the status quo as to take up oppositional or radical causes would be to doom the paper to low sales as a result of its now *non-mainstream* views. This is the workings of hegemony in action.

Journalistic texts are "the outcome of specific professional practices and techniques, which could be and can be quite different with quite different results" (Fairclough, 1995b, p. 204). Through discourse, newspapers "*make things mean*" through "selecting and presenting... structuring and shaping" (Hall, 1982, p. 64, emphasis in original). By placing facts into an interpretive schema, journalists filter out information regarded as extraneous. Thus, the simple act of deciding what to include in a story and what to exclude (or, to go back even further, what stories to report on and what not to report on) sees journalists wielding power to "represent the

world in certain definite ways” (Hall, 1986, p. 9). Journalists police the boundaries of possibility, determining “which meanings circulate and which do not” (Garnham, 1990, p. 8), and thus open and close down particular possibilities for audiences. Of course, time, space, and resource constraints mean that journalists cannot possibly fully represent all sides to every story. This is a mere observation rather than a criticism; journalism clearly functions under certain constraints. At the same time, the presentation of news through seemingly innocent decisions regarding content and context enables the news media to wield enormous power to organize and make sense of reality.

According to Hay (1996a), “media influence does not reside in the power of direct ideological indoctrination, but in the ability to frame the discursive context within which political subjectivities are constructed, reinforced, and reconstituted” (p. 261). Hegemony does *not* refer to overt media bias or partisanship (although it acknowledges the possibility for these to occur), but instead the structuring of ideas as natural or commonsensical. In other words, media power rests on the ability not just to construct reality but to construct *particular* realities, and in doing so normalizing and naturalizing *particular* perspectives while marginalizing and delegitimizing others. This, scholars contend, privileges the interests of dominant social groups and, in doing so, sustains inequitable and exploitive power relations (Fairclough, 2001, 2003; Gitlin, 1980; Hall, 1982, 1986; Hallin, 1987; van Dijk, 1991, 1993). According to Beckett (1977), newspapers “define the parameters of respectable debate” (p. 47), placing certitude on some possibilities and ruling others out as absurd. For Reeves and Campbell (1994), the media “police” the “horizons of common sense” (p. 59). This has social effects, for “news discourses help to naturalize a cultural politics of legitimacy so as to lend justification to modern society’s distribution of power and influence” (Allan & Zelizer, 2004, p. 77). In other words, the disproportionate distribution of

power, wealth, and opportunity in capitalist society is *created* through economic conditions and *recreated* through discourse. Therefore, journalism plays “a critical role in the battle of ideas over how... society is to be explained and how it is to be justified” (Glasgow University Media Group, 1982, p. 128). The matter of how power, wealth, and opportunity should be distributed in a capitalist society finds an answer (if not a finite resolution) in the output of the news media, which helps to naturalize dominant meanings. How the public arrives at an understanding of inequities of wealth and status, the economic system, the relationship between capital and labor, and so on is mediated by mass communication, placing the news media at center stage of any consideration of ideology and hegemony.

Journalism consists of choices: what topics to cover, how to report on them, how much space to afford them, where in the newspaper to place the story, what resources to invest in this coverage, and how long a topic should be covered. According to Fulford (1999),

at their most accomplished, journalistic narratives may appear natural and inevitable, as if each story had to be told and could not have been told another way. But the facts are chosen and shaped by journalists, and necessarily reflect their interests and traditions (p. 80).

Put another way, “news is what newspapermen make it” (Gieber, 1964, p. 173). Its creation is complex:

The media do not simply and transparently report events which are “naturally” newsworthy *in themselves*. “News” is the end-product of a complex process which begins with the systematic sorting and selecting of events and topics according to a socially constructed set of categories (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978, p. 53, emphasis in original).

In other words, newspapers invest significance into phenomena, letting audiences know that this is an important topic worth knowing about. This point is reiterated by Fowler (1991):

News is not a natural phenomenon emerging straight from reality, but a product. It is produced by an industry, shaped by the bureaucratic and economic structure of that industry, by the relations between the media and other industries and, most importantly, by relations with government and other political organizations (p. 222).

The end product – i.e., the journalistic “text” – comes together as a result of a variety of competing forces, from the economic forces that shape content, to the values of the newsroom, to the conventions of journalism itself. For Gans, (1979), journalists “rarely make selection decisions on overtly ideological grounds; rather, they work within organizations which provide them with only a limited amount of leeway in selection decisions, which is further reduced by their allegiance to professionally shared values” (p. 79). These “routine cultural practices” (Walton & Davis, 1977, p. 133) create “a systematically structured over-accessing to the media of those in powerful and privileged institutional positions” (Hall et al, 1978, p. 58). For groups that challenge “powerful and privileged institutional positions” such as trade unions, this poses a problem.

### **Journalism and the Social Construction of Organized Labor**

Journalism assumes a consensual view of society that assumes everybody shares the same interests (Hall et al, 1978). However, this is not the case when it comes to waged labor for the simple reason that if labor and capital shared the same interests, there would be no reason for trade unions to exist. Labor reporting works from the assumption that “the normal workings of the market economy will somehow benefit everyone within it” (Glasgow University Media



Group, 1982, p. 129), as though the system naturally produces equilibrium. In fact, capitalism emphatically *does not* produce equilibrium, and is in fact a dynamic and unstable force, as numerous recessions in the post-World War Two era have demonstrated (Harvey, 2005). The media's role in naturalizing the normalcy of capitalism is important:

[C]apitalism is inherently unstable. People do not appreciate being exploited and hence there is always the potential that the working classes will become conscious of the nature of their relation to the means of production and revolt. Therefore, the capitalist class who benefit from their relation to the means of production have to fight to conceal the true nature of capitalism from the workers that they exploit... The methods of "disciplining" the working classes are many and varied, but essentially they fit into one of two inter-related techniques: misguiding the proletariat into accepting current social relations as natural, necessary or even enjoyable and marginalizing and subduing dissent. While material in focus and effect, each of these techniques may be conceptualized as a discourse process achieved communicatively. The language used in newspapers is one key site in this naturalization of inequality and neutralization of dissent (Richardson, 2007, p. 6).

Scholars analyzing media representations of organized labor have found that the news media present labor agitation as a threat to the settled consensus of society, presenting a timid workforce as a necessary precondition to economic success and leaving unquestioned the fundamental assumptions of the capitalist economy and the structure of capital-labor relations (Brennen, 2005; Downing, 1980; Glasgow University Media Group, 1976, 1980, 1982; Goldman & Rajagopal, 1991; Hartley, 1982; Hay, 1996a; Knight, 1982, 2001; Martin, 2004; McChesney, 1999; Parenti, 1986; Puette, 1992; Seaton, 1982; Verzuh, 1990; Young & Crutchley, 1977).

According to Hallin (1987), “to say the media play a ‘hegemonic’ role is to say that they contribute to the maintenance of consent for a system of power” (p. 18). To the extent that news media representations “help sustain relations of domination... they are ideological” (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, p. 37). Such representations “close off the possibility of revealing what broad popular support might exist or be developed for the social forces that underlay social change” (Panitch & Leys, 1997, p. 59). Alternative ideas to capitalism, or even moderate reforms that would see capitalism work in the public interest, are closed off, and the process of a people becoming a public, to use John Dewey’s terms, is aborted.

In order for an event to become “news” it must be “judged to be newsworthy by journalists, who exercise their news sense within the constraints of the news organizations within which they operate” (Harrison, 2006, p. 13). However, scholars have found that for organized labor to even appear on the news agenda is a rarity unless a strike is occurring, leaving the positive work of trade unions in serving the needs of their members unheralded and the efforts by trade unionists from preventing strikes from ever occurring are erased from the picture (Bok & Dunlop, 1970; Goldman & Rajagopal, 1991; Griffiths, 1977; Puette, 1992; Tunstall, 1983). As a result, trade union affairs are positioned as “bad news” by virtue of standards of newsworthiness alone, and news reports become dominated with conflict and disorder. For McChesney (1999), “if one read only the commercial media, it would be difficult to determine what on earth good was served by having labor unions at all” (p. 298). The need for stories to be “newsworthy” means that conflict between capital and labor is permanently one-sided. Strikes get significantly more attention than layoffs, for “it is much more newsworthy when labor is denied to capital... than when capital is denied to labor” (Harmon & Lee, 2010, p. 504), such as when a firm closes down or moves its operations abroad.

Industrial disputes are like any other type of conflict inasmuch as they require two parties. However, scholars have argued that labor reporting is generally decontextualized and ignorant of the roots of industrial conflict, seeing strike action as the impulsive action of union members or boisterous union leaders, rather than what it actually is – the breakdown of dialogue between labor and capital. This kind of reporting does little to advance audience understanding of union’s role in the workplace, presenting industrial conflict as though it has suddenly occurred as a result of worker intransigence rather than the accumulation of weeks, months, or perhaps years of underlying tension and unresolved requests, making trade unions seem irrational and troublesome (Downing, 1980; Glasgow University Media Group, 1976, 1980; Parenti, 1986; Walton & Davis, 1977; Young & Crutchley, 1977). This manifests itself in the language used to describe trade unions, which paints workers as irrational and greedy and management as conciliatory and flexible (Parenti, 1986); management makes “offers” while unions make “demands” (Glasgow University Media Group, 1976, p. 401). Owners and management are portrayed as courageous in the face of great adversity, doing their best to be cooperative while not buckling under the weight of union pressure (Brennen, 2005; Glasgow University Media Group, 1976; Rollings, 1983). This one-sidedness gets “to the point where the nouns and verbs describing management actions are generally positive while the matching vocabulary for workers’ actions is negative” (Glasgow University Media Group, 1976, p. 401).

Given this parochial focus, it is unsurprising that the damage done to the business’ profits and reputation is overplayed while the damage done to the health and wellbeing of workers is downplayed (Brennen, 2005; Glasgow University Media Group, 1982), and that the wage demands of workers are overplayed while the wages of management go unreported (Parenti, 1986). Naturally, where there is economic success, it is down to employers, who are seen as “the

embodiment of production” (Martin, 2004, p. 9). Business successes are solely down to the vision and drive of management rather than the toil of workers. This kind of reporting ignores wider economic circumstances in the name of pinning the blame for economic worries on an intransigent workforce. Any broader issues pertaining to incompetent or intransigent management, the specific circumstances of a particular sector of industry or workplace, technological or trade issues, or even the broader workings of the capitalist economy are conspicuous by their absence.

Scholars have argued that the news media present discussions of trade unionism not in terms of their impact on workers but on members of the public who are uninvolved in the dispute but whose services may be affected as a result of industrial action. This personalizes industrial conflict and prompts readers to see the analysis in binary terms of “me versus them” (Greenberg, 2004; Knight, 2001). The news media present information on industrial conflict or the potential for industrial conflict in terms of its impact on “the price, quality, and availability of consumable goods and services and on the consumer economy at large” (Martin, 2004, p. 5). Trade unions are presented as indifferent to the public wellbeing, acting only in sectional self-interest (Seaton, 1982), while the impact on the workforce if strike action is not taken is often absent from the narrative (Parenti, 1986). However, the decision to represent the inconvenience to the public caused by the strike is a *choice*; reporters could just as reasonably represent the public as fellow citizen-workers (Martin, 2004). Representing citizens this way reinforces the notion that the public’s primary role is as a consumer rather than a creator. Moreover, it suggests that “the role of the consumer is to decide whether or not to buy a product or service, and not to inquire about the production process” (Martin, 2004, p. 9). This kind of discourse is “an expression of a profoundly fragmenting individualism” (Cross, 2000, p. 191), where “the consumer is valued

when acting individually and a menace when acting collectively on behalf of a social purpose” (Martin, 2004, p. 9). The assumption is that unions disrupt otherwise harmonious workplace conditions and life would be much better if they did not exist (Puette, 1992).

### **Tabloid Discourse**

A number of scholars have examined the discursive conventions of the British tabloid press. Given the influence of the economic marketplace on news output, it is no accident that newspapers adopt the tone, linguistic conventions, and political outlook they do. While newspaper style is “framed as [a] purely functional or aesthetic judgment” in fact “these stylistic values are not timeless and neutral, but have a history and a politics. They play a role in constructing a relationship with a specific imagined audience, and also sustaining a particular ideology of news reporting” (Cameron, 1996, pp. 315-316). The style of a newspaper is “chosen and maintained with continual reference to some notion of who their readers are, what they will understand, what their social position is, what is their state of knowledge, and so on” (Hall, 1975, p. 22). In other words, tabloid newspapers not only construct reality but also construct *an audience*.

#### **“The man on the street”**

British tabloid newspapers use “matey” and “plain speaking” language (Westergaard, 1977, p. 103) and present material in “easy-to-consume formats” (Rooney, 2000, p. 91) to draw the mass readership of the tabloids into a community of shared values. This helps identify the tabloid in the minds of its readers as “on their side,” as language enables a “greater proximity to the lifeworld of the audience” (Tomlinson, 1997, p. 77). It is precisely the language of accessibility that makes the tabloids’ influence all the more powerful, as they tap into the lived

experience of their readers and position issues from the singular perspective of the ordinary Briton (Conboy, 2006; Phillips, 1998). The tabloids consciously portray themselves as an institution on the side of the reader, cultivating an earthy, populist tone that places them of equal standing to the “man on the street” and cultivating skepticism toward what are portrayed as vested interests. This is done “with the deliberate aim of confirming the existence of a national tabloid readership” (Conboy, 2006, p. 14). The issues the tabloids tackle and the way they present them demonstrates to working class readers that this is a product for them, addressing their concerns in the way they would talk about them (Sparks, 1988, 1992). The result of this approach is coverage that offers “an immediate explanatory framework in terms of individual and personal causes and responses” (Sparks, 1992, p. 22). The tabloids strip phenomena down to simple binaries, personalized through their direct impact upon the singular reader, instead of placing facts into a broader context where numerous stakeholders play a role (Corner & Pels, 2003; Rooney, 2000; Sparks, 1992). A spate of crime, for example, will be presented in terms of how the reader will be vulnerable and prone to assault, and so on. A public sector strike will be presented in terms of how it will directly inconvenience the reader. While neither approach is necessarily untrue or unethical, they do not do the important work of organizing facts and placing them into context, one of the crucial roles of journalism in a democracy. For Sparks (1992), the tabloids “offer the experiences of the individual as the direct and unmediated key to the understanding of the social totality” (p. 41). Put another way, society is understood through the prism of the individual rather than the collective, which places collective bodies like trade unions at a disadvantage.

## Issue coverage

Unlike the high-minded agenda of the broadsheet newspapers, the tabloids pursue a defiantly populist mission, devoting numerous column inches to coverage of celebrities, sport, and political scandal (Franklin, 1997). It is not *necessarily* the case that the tabloids will cover different stories or features than the broadsheet; what is more likely to be the case is that the same stories are reported in the tabloids but in a vastly different manner to what one would find in the broadsheets:

An interesting exercise is to mark the day's major news stories in one of the so-called "heavies" like *The Times*, the *Daily Telegraph*, or *The Independent*. Then try to find those stories in *The Sun*. You will. The amount of space and prominence given to them will simply be different (Grose, 1997, p. 229).

Scholars have found that the space given to political affairs declined in tabloids newspapers from the 1960s onward, which has led to a knowledge gap between the information-rich and the information-poor, stratified along class lines (Dahlgren, 1995). For Rooney (2000), the "oversimplification of issues and... low density of information" that characterizes tabloid newspapers is problematic as it does not provide the educative function one would traditionally ascribe to a newspaper (p. 91). On the other hand, Conboy (2006) has taken a more optimistic stance, arguing that the "conversational style need not rule out engagement with serious issues" as their "language of accessibility" enables "readers to make sense of complex social and political issues on their own terms" (p. 11). For Conboy, the tabloids are "characterized not by an absolute neglect of politics but by an increasingly eclectic dialogue with ordinary people on major political issues" (p. 10). Conboy's point, that tabloid newspapers do not ignore politics altogether but find ways of explaining politics to a working class audience, is well-taken, but

creeps dangerously close to moral relativism inasmuch as it ignores the dangerous consequences of an uninformed or misinformed polity.

### **Political outlook**

The British press is noteworthy for its partisanship that manifests itself not only in its editorial content but in the tone and slant of its news reporting. According to Evans (1983), the British press is more “polluted by partisan judgments than the press in most other democracies and certainly by comparison with the press of the United States” (p. 4). One cannot expect objectivity in British newspapers for that has never been a tradition of the British press. The British press is, instead, “habitually partisan” (Sparks, 2006, p. 121) in its news content. In their discussion of impartiality in the British media system, Seaton and Pimlott (1987) write that, in contrast to British broadcasting, “the assumption in the case of newspapers is of *imbalance*, which each paper reflecting a particular editorial or proprietorial point of view” (p. 133, my emphasis). The British newspaper market is dominated by right-wing newspapers with only the *Daily Mirror* and *The Guardian* taking a left-of-center stance, while several attempts to create a left-wing press favorable to the trade unions failed (Chippendale & Horrie, 1988; McKay & Barr, 1976).

### **Criticisms of Ideology**

Since the late 1970s, there has been an encroachment of market values across all aspects of western culture, pushing back against the state and imposing its order on politics, education, and the arts, and bringing about chasms of wealth and income inequality (Giroux, 2005). At the same time, “the concept of ideology disappeared from much academic work in media and cultural studies” (Philo & Miller, 2000, p. 831). This was part of a broader shift away from the



language of Marxism across the academy as feminism, race, and sexuality studies pushed their way to the fore (Munt, 2000) and the poststructuralist philosophy of theorists like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Francois Lyotard became in vogue. The concept of ideology in particular has been under sustained attack.

Scholars have called for the abandonment of ideology in favor of a notion of power drawn from the scholarship of Michel Foucault. According to Bourdieu (1984), by the 1980s the concept of ideology had become “so used and abused that it does not work anymore” (p. 266). Poststructuralist scholars characterize ideology as a set of “consciously produced falsehoods” that possess a “conspiracy theory” (Sholle, 1988, p. 20) tone. For Foucault (1980), power relations are woven into every act, interaction, and utterance:

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it does not only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasures, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression (p. 119).

Power is not a negative force or the preserve of a particular class, group, or strata, but an ubiquitous element of all interaction, emanating through discourse. Decentering ideology necessitates the decentering of material conditions, and scholars (e.g., Baudrillard, 1975; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, 1987; Lyotard, 1984) have followed this line of thinking to its conclusion by rejecting the notion that economics is central to understanding social relations. However, Foucault’s notion is highly solipsistic, for if power is everywhere, it is nowhere. If loci of power cannot be clearly identified and differentials in power relations grounded in material conditions cannot be recognized, then correcting these differentials is next

to impossible. Fairclough (1995a) has cautioned scholars against this view, arguing that it has “helped divert attention from the analysis of power asymetrics and relations of domination” (p. 17). Lacking a firm grasp of differential power relations one has no ability to change these relations in favor of a more progressive, egalitarian society, for under Foucault’s framework “the source of this power remains, in general, opaque. And the vagueness about power and the structures and practices of domination allows a similar vagueness about resistance” (Garnham, 1995, p. 69).

Another critique of ideology is the rejection of “grand narratives,” an argument developed chiefly in the work of Lyotard (1984), who argued that the idea of a master narrative framing society is inherently totalitarian, regardless of its politics, because it infers the domination of one orthodoxy over another. According to Poster (1989), “poststructuralists question the easy assumption that the theoretical subject can generate a discourse that represents the real, unmask domination in the real, without himself/herself introducing new forms of domination (p. 4). This view flatly rejects the idea of a final “Truth” that only the privileged scholar can have access to and in so doing denounces the theory of ideology as inherently elitist. Such an approach stresses the *polysemy* of texts; that is, the potential for multiple readings to be drawn of the same text (McKerrow, 1989). Scholars in this tradition emphasize the agency of audiences to draw their own meanings rather than fall like dupes for the dominant ideology. This is celebrated by poststructuralists as examples of resistance and proof of the invalidity of traditional Marxist readings of media and society (Fiske, 1989, 1992; Kipnis, 1992). These scholars appropriated Gramsci – albeit incorrectly – in advancing the possibility of rearguard “counter-hegemonic” movements through micro-political transgressions that disturb the natural order of things, what Foucault (1984) described as localized resistance within the “fine meshes

of power” (p. 58). According to Harris (1992), critical scholars drawn to poststructuralism appropriated Gramsci’s theory of hegemony for their own purposes, conveniently ignoring the elements of the theory that explain how ideological configurations come to being and focusing instead on counter-hegemonic resistance. For Harris, too much scholarship that claims a link to Gramsci is both ahistorical and apolitical and this only serves to make the concept of hegemony devoid of meaning as scholars publish endless tracts where every act, however inconsequential in changing social relations, is read as resistive.

Thus, instead of an over-arching explanatory framework for social structure and social change – which, for all its faults, Marxism provides – poststructuralist scholars end up celebrating resistance that does little to disturb social relations, from Fiske’s (1989) view of shopping as a form of rebellion, to Kipnis’ (1992) argument that hardcore pornography is a form of resistance because it upsets dominant social norms, to “graffiti in lavatory stalls, oral histories, diaries, journals, sewing, weaving, and embroidery” being read as acts of sweatshop employee agency (Shi, 2008, p. 370). The goal is not systemic change but disruptions and transgressions at the local level. On this note, Morris (1990) offered a critique that remains both timely and instructive: “I get the feeling that somewhere in some... publisher’s vault there is a master disk from which thousands of versions of the same article about pleasure, resistance, and the politics of consumption are being run off under different names with minor variations” (p. 21).

The poststructuralist position is ethically untenable. When confronted with injustice, oppression, and inequality, the role of the critical scholar is to identify it, call attention to how it is maintained, and, hopefully, disrupt its workings. To quote Fairclough (1995a), “intellectuals should not feel embarrassed about making judgments of truth; on the contrary... they have a responsibility to bring the particular perspective they can contribute into the public domain over

the great social and political issues” (p. 19). Scholars have an ethical responsibility to critique ideas that are damaging to the health of the polity. We cannot engage in a poststructuralist free-for-all that sees “all representations as equal” (Fairclough, 1995b, p. 47), for this undermines the purpose of socially conscious scholarship. The danger of poststructuralism is that it risks “perpetuating an ideology of resignation to existing social relations disguised as critique and resistance” (Cloud, 2006, p. 330), a position that ultimately promotes stasis. Instead of valorizing acts of resistance that do not disturb inequitable material relations – which Cloud (2006) has witheringly described as “sacred individualism” (p. 335) – scholarly concern should instead be trained upon the workings of ideology in contemporary society. As Philo (1999) has argued, if “texts have no inherent meaning and it all depends on how they are interpreted and used,” scholars lose the ability to “argue that some elements of our culture are oppressive and damaging” (pp. *ix-x*). Poststructuralism offers “no possible effective struggle against capitalism, and its imperatives, only micro-struggle within it” (Cloud, 2006, p. 346). Poststructuralism offers a fatalistic view of social relations that does not disturb an inequitable social order.

Poststructuralism’s rise to hegemony occurred at the same time as a political right-wing centered on individualism and the free market was also in the ascendance. For Philo and Miller (1998, 2000) poststructuralist scholars are guilty of “cultural compliance” in playing into the hands of a right-wing narrative, decentering materiality at a time when material inequality was reaching its apex and removing ideology from critical scholarship’s vocabulary at a time when it was badly needed. Poststructuralism’s ethos of “skepticism, uncertainty, fragmentation, nihilism, and incoherence” (Allman, 2001, p. 209) has led the field away from ideology and, in doing so, away from concrete political engagement. To the extent that it aborts a firm understanding of inequitable material relations and the ideologies that support them, poststructuralism does critical

work a disservice. While this does not necessitate a return to the notion that “since this is what Marx said and we have thought, it is and will ever be so” (Hall, 1988a, p. 5), it does mean that the “uncritical populist mode of interpretation” (McGuigan, 1992, p. 244) that poststructuralism has bequeathed must be rejected. Returning to ideology as a framework for understanding social relations can help in this effort, for without it we “lose track of the importance of value and power and consequently the desirability of changing the world” (Downey, 2008, p. 73).

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has introduced critical discourse analysis as the theoretical framework for this study, offering explanations of what it means to be “critical” and what it means to be concerned with “discourse.” It has also discussed the concept of ideology, how it is maintained through hegemony, and brought into being through journalism and the British tabloid press in particular. Having established the role of newspapers in democratic society and analyzed how journalistic discourse is shaped by economic factors and the conventions of journalism, this study now turns away from journalism momentarily to look at the role of trade unions in British political life.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### TRADE UNIONS IN HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

This study assumes that discourse can only be understood when placed in historical and political context, for “the present is made within the past” (Heffernan, 2001, p. 4). Therefore an examination of the historical and political context within which trade unions are situated at the turn of the twenty-first century is important. In 1979, 55% of the working British population belonged to a trade union, the highest number to date (Waddington, 2000). Public opinion polling from the time indicates that the British public regarded the unions of the day as more powerful than the government (cf. Crewe, 1993). However, this was to change. According to Howell (2005), the British labor movement was

at the peak of its power and influence in 1979, when more than half of all British employees belonged to unions and more than four-fifths were covered by collective pay-setting mechanisms... And yet, [by] the dawn of the twenty-first century, trade union density has almost halved; the extent of collective bargaining coverage and the numbers of strikes have collapsed to the lowest levels since the 1920s... Where trade unionism exists, it is of a weaker, more marginal form, consulted more often than negotiated with; and various forms of individualized industrial relations have come to dominate the landscape of the British economy (p. 1).

This chapter attempts to answer the question of how this came about in order to better situate trade unions at the turn of the twenty-first century within a historical and political context.

As noted in the previous chapter, British trade unions are woven into the fabric of the British political tapestry as a result of their relationship with the Labour Party. For Drucker

(1982), “the [Labour] party is unthinkable without the unions” (p. 260) due to the institutional ties that bind them, while the relationship between Labour and the trade unions has been described by one scholar as “the most contentious in British political life” (Minkin, 1992, p. 646). Furthermore, the strikes examined in this study all take place with Britain under a Labour government. This chapter examines trade unions in the context of this relationship as well as how trade unions have shaped, and been shaped by, broader political forces. The chapter examines British trade unionism’s roots in the Labour Party, role in the “post-war consensus,” precipitous decline with the emergence of Thatcherism and neoliberal economics, and relationship with “New Labour” at the end of the twentieth century and start of the twenty-first. It then offers a brief discussion of the trade union movement’s relationship with the British media before providing the necessary context to the strikes analyzed by this study.

### **From “Lib-Labism” to the “Post-war Consensus”**

The Labour Party was formed in the early years of the twentieth century as a vehicle that would champion the interests of the working class. Whereas traditionally trade unions had supported the Liberal Party, growing disenchantment at the Liberals’ hesitancy to embark on a program of radical reform saw them break with the party and set up a party of their own, tasked with representing the interests of organized labor (Fenley, 1980; Lovell, 1982). The new party’s “basic and unifying purpose” was to advance the industrial and political goals of the working class (Minkin, 1992, p. 11). The Labour Party would be allowed to develop as a party with the assistance of the Liberals, who agreed to give prospective Labour candidates for Parliament a clear run (Rubinstein, 1982). However, the Labour Party grew faster than expected, and by the end of the First World War was close to threatening the Liberal Party as the major “second

party” to the Conservatives. This rapid growth saw many trade unionists and party members calling for an end to “the era of Lib-Labism” (Renshaw, 1982, p. 99), and any lasting ties with the Liberal Party were swiftly broken.

In 1922, the Labour Party surpassed the Liberals as the dominant second party of British politics, where it has remained ever since. However, the demarcation of Labour and the unions as the political and industrial wings of the labor movement became very problematic as Labour became a party of government (Fenley, 1980). Union leaders would complain about lack of consultation, feeling that the party had a responsibility to consult with the unions on matters of government policy (Ludlam, 2001), while former party leader Ramsay MacDonald (1911-1914, 1922-1931) described the trade unions as “a terrible incubus” (Fenley, 1980, p. 58). The Labour Party failed to back striking trade unionists in the General Strike of 1926, placing further tension on the relationship (Fenley, 1980).

The emergence of trade unions and their institutionalized role within the Labour Party is considered by many historians to be a reason why revolutionary sentiment did not flourish in the United Kingdom, as the concerns of the working class found expression in the party; where there was an outbreak of industrial action, as in the General Strike of 1926, it “turned out to have converted [trade unionists] to Keynes rather than to Marx” (Pollard, 1969, p. 115). Following the General Strike of 1926, the relationship between the Labour Party and the trade unions grew closer, culminating in Labour, led by Clement Attlee, winning the 1945 general election with a massive (and, at the time, surprising) victory over the Winston Churchill-led Conservative Party. For Coates (1982), this was the moment “the trade union movement had arrived” (p. 171) with union-sponsored MPs in the Cabinet and an avowedly socialist program. Attlee’s government created a political economy that operated on “the assumption that the state could legitimately act



as the representative and guardian of collective social interests” (Leadbeter, 1989, p. 138). This philosophy was evident in Keynesian demand management economics, the nationalization of vast sectors of the economy, the goal of full employment as an article of faith, the establishment of a comprehensive welfare state, and the creation of a National Health Service.

The Attlee government heralded the emergence of the tripartite structure of economic planning, where state, capital, and labor worked together to manufacture and produce what was necessary for the public (Gamble, 1988); unions played a key role in economic policymaking and were “consulted by ministers as a matter of routine” in this period (Crewe, 1993, p. 5). Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the trade unions supported successive Labour leaders in keeping the far left of the party at bay (Minkin, 1980). However, attempts by the Labour government in 1969 to enact laws that would mandate “conciliation pauses, compulsory strike ballots, and the Ministerial settlement of inter-union disputes” (Fenley, 1980, p. 71) had a profoundly negative reaction among trade unionists, who marshaled support within the Labour Party to defeat the plans. The architecture designed by the Attlee government “established the contours within which post-war politics and trade unionism would operate” (Fenley, 1980, pp. 66-67). Despite periods under Conservative governments that accepted the post-war consensus pragmatically if not ideologically (Gamble, 1988), there was broad support on the fundamentals of the post-war consensus until 1979, when, without overstating it, everything changed.

### **The “Winter of Discontent”**

In the 1970s, many in the Conservative Party – Margaret Thatcher among them – questioned the wisdom of the post-war consensus, arguing that the dependency culture brought about by the welfare state and the growing militancy of the trade unions was a noxious

combination contributing to Britain's economic decline (Pimlott & Cook, 1982). Sir Keith Joseph, a confidante and supporter of Thatcher, considered the post-war consensus to be synonymous with "six poisons," namely "excessive government spending; high direct taxation; egalitarianism; excessive nationalization; a politicized trade union movement...; and an anti-enterprise culture" (Heffernan, 2001, p. 23). According to Howell (2005), the likes of Thatcher, Joseph, and their supporters quickly identified "monetarism, price stability, privatization, and labor market deregulation" as the panacea to British ills (p. 135).

The Labour Party had returned to office in 1974 after a four-year spell out of power largely because the Conservatives were deemed incapable of dealing with the trade unions (Marsh, 1992). However, the relationship between Labour and the trade unions gradually broke down over incomes policy, leading to a series of widespread strikes over the winter of 1978 and into 1979 by public sector employees, including health workers, undertakers, refuse collectors, and truck drivers. Newspapers attached the moniker "the Winter of Discontent" to the period, and public dissatisfaction with how Labour handled the strikes was believed to be one of the reasons behind the electoral downfall of Prime Minister James Callaghan in 1979 and the election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party. For Taylor (1982), the winter of discontent was "no sudden outburst of class warfare" but the spillover of years of "bitterness and frustration of tens of thousands of low-paid workers" (p. 206). However, it "damaged Labour's reputation as the party that could manage the unions" (Heath, Jowell, & Curtice, 1994, p. 3).

The Conservative Party and the British tabloid press represented the winter of discontent as a national crisis prompted by "an overextended, overloaded, and ungovernable state" with trade unions "holding the country to ransom" (Hay, 1996a, p. 255). According to Gramsci

(1971), a crisis represents a moment where the social fabric may be torn apart and sewn together again in a different pattern:

It may be ruled out that immediate economic crises of themselves produce fundamental historical events; they can simply create a terrain more favorable to the dissemination of certain modes of thought, and certain ways of posing and resolving questions involving the entire subsequent development of national life (p. 184).

The winter of discontent represented such a crisis; a pivotal conjuncture in which the scaffolding of British society violently collapsed and a very different framework was constructed in its place. It signposted a reorientation of British political economy, providing Thatcher and the Conservative Party with the opportunity to fundamentally transform the philosophy that had underpinned British economic theory and practice since 1945. The Conservatives “came to power determined to abandon [the post-war consensus] and create a quite different set of industrial relations institutions and practices” (Howell, 2005, p. 125). Their election represented not only a change of government but a radical reordering of the philosophy that underpinned the relationship between citizen and state, overhauling the sensibilities and dynamics of the British state. This was, in short, “the moment the Old Order crumbled” (Jenkins, 1987, p. 28).

### **Thatcherism and Neoliberalism**

Thatcherism fits comfortably in the tradition of economic philosophers like Friedrich von Hayek and Milton Friedman, something Thatcher herself attested to (Mudge, 2008). This tradition posits that “society is constituted by individuals: it is nothing other than a set of human atoms” (Leadbeter, 1989, p. 142), or, to quote Thatcher herself, “there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women” (quoted in Harvey, 2005, p. 23). Collectivity,

trade unions, and the state represented conformity, uniformity, and control; the market represented freedom, choice, and individuality. This represented a major philosophical shift from the post-war consensus, which the Thatcher governments set about eradicating “with an almost unprecedented combination of astute political skill and ideological zeal” (Manning, 1998, p. 252). In short, the fabric of the post-war ideological tapestry was unraveled.

For Harvey (2005), the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 was a pivotal moment in the emergence of the economic doctrine that he and others have dubbed “neoliberalism.” Harvey has argued that along with the reforms of President Ronald Reagan in the United States of America, Leader of the Chinese Communist Party Deng Xiaopang, and President Augusto Pinochet of Chile, the Thatcher government succeeded in bringing forth a global market culture. Neoliberalism is so-called because it is a variant of the classic liberalism espoused by Adam Smith, whose *laissez-faire* theory of economics argued that the state should play a minimal role in economics and instead leave economic matters to the invisible hand of the free market (Holborow, 2007). It “represents a reassertion of the fundamental beliefs of the liberal political economy that was the dominant political ideology of the nineteenth century” (Clarke, 2005, p. 57). Indeed, as Munck (2005) argues, the success of neoliberalism is in the way it “successfully articulated neoclassical economic theories with a liberal individualist conception of political freedom” (p. 65).

According to Harvey (2005), neoliberalism is “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human wellbeing can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade” (p. 2). Under neoliberalism, policies such as low taxes, limited government intervention, and weak trade unions are not seen simply as preferred policies

but preconditions to human liberty (Harvey, 2003, 2005, 2006; Munck, 2005). In short, it is the market, not government, that “contain[s] all that is necessary to deliver freedom and well-being to all and sundry” (Harvey, 2003, p. 2010). The role of the state under neoliberalism is to “create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices” (Harvey, 2006, p. 145). The kinds of policies pursued by the Attlee government following World War Two are anathema to neoliberalism, as neoliberalism has a diametrically opposite view of the role of government. This has meant that the role of the state in Britain, as across the western world, has been systematically scaled back since the late 1970s, as the “protective coverings” of the post-war era have been systematically “strip[ped] away” (Harvey, 2005, p. 168).

That trade unions would find themselves ill at ease under this new economic framework was perhaps inevitable. The Thatcher government came to office zealous to “eradicate a trade union movement that was too powerful, both politically and economically” (Howell, 2005, p. 134). Hayek, the aforementioned economist who Thatcher was an admirer of, argued that “there can be no salvation for Britain until the special privileges granted to the trade unions three-quarters of a century ago are revoked” (Hayek, 1984, p. 58). The religious language here is illustrative, suggesting a crusade against organized labor. It was a crusade that Thatcher willingly took up, working to “significantly reduce the ability of unions to coordinate, and enhance the capacity of employers to resist” (Western, 1997, p. 195). A series of “piecemeal but relentless” (Crewe, 1993, p. 5) legislation was enacted, systematically stripping away years of rights accrued by the labor movement, including the prohibition of the “closed shop,” the outlawing of secondary picketing, the tightening of laws on union funding, and the restriction of the conditions by which union members may go on strike. According to Reid (2004),

Neoliberal rhetoric was used [by Thatcher] to present union restrictions on the labor market as the root cause of the country's economic problems, as well as to paint a picture of an ideal "free society" in which no interference with individual choice could be tolerated (p. 397).

The Thatcher government succeeded in portraying trade unions as backward, anachronistic relics of a bygone era, out-of-touch "Jurassics" unable to adapt to the exciting world of innovation and flexibility that neoliberalism had engendered (Beynon, 2003, p. 271). This was, according to Fairbrother and Yates (2003), an "ideological war" (p. 14) on the trade unions.

Of particular note is the National Union of Mineworkers' (NUM) strike of 1984 to 1985, when miners across Britain went on strike at the prospect of pit closures. Arguing that cheaper coal could be imported, the Conservatives were committed to a program of closures on the grounds that mining was uneconomical. The NUM went on a year-long strike against the prospect of pit closures and job losses. However, the full resources of the state were mobilized against men Thatcher described as "the enemy within" (Williams, 2009, p. 36). Because a national ballot had not been called, striking miners were disallowed statutory strike pay. The security services were engaged in a campaign to subvert the union by falsifying links to the Russian and Libyan governments (Milne, 2004), while the news media engaged in a "propaganda assault" against the miners which presented "a totally distorted view of the strike" (Williams, 2009, p. 39). After striking for a year, the miners returned to work, defeated. This was "an object lesson in power politics" (Routledge, 2009, p. 155) that saw "the back of a core element of the labor movement... broken" (Harvey, 2005, p. 59). The miners' strike was "in many ways the defining moment for Conservative industrial relations policy, and a microcosm of the range and scope of state action employed in the restructuring of British industrial relations"

(Howell, 2005, p. 154). In the words of Thatcher's adviser Tim Bell, the miners' strike represents "the seminal moment [in British history] in which the left lost and the right won" (quoted in Holland, 2009, p. 111). With trade union power systematically crushed, the Thatcher government was free to pass yet more reforms pushing an agenda of deregulation, privatization, flexible labor markets, and the mobility of capital (Harvey, 2005). The result of these reforms is a drastically weakened union movement. Unions have had to adapt and fashion an agenda away from the traditional notion of collective rights in favor of the assistance of individual employees in their negotiations with management (Bassett, 1986; Fairbrother & Yates, 2003; Guest & Hoque, 1996), while their institutional role as players in national economics has been reduced to that of a sectional special interest group engaged in "ad hoc lobbying" (Howell, 2005, p. 131). Summing up the Thatcher period, Crewe (1993) wrote, "rarely, if ever, has a major organized interest group lost power and status as rapidly and thoroughly as the trade unions did between 1979 and 1990" (p. 5).

Stuart Hall's extensive work on Thatcherism as a hegemonic formation (see, e.g., Hall, 1979, 1988a, 1988b, 1989, 1998; Hall & Held, 1989; Hall & Jacques, 1983, 1989) is illustrative of how Thatcherism was not just an economic or political project, but was able to weave together various elements of society and capture them into a populist, coherent narrative. Thus, the privatization of public utilities, the deregulation of financial markets, the withering away of Britain's industrial base, and the erosion of trade union rights were manifestations of a broader ideological framework. According to Hay (1996b),

Thatcherism was an inherently strategic project which sought to construct a new set of dominant ideologies and "common sense" assumptions... The values of compromise, consensus, equality, and welfarism were to be replaced by a combination of those of

consumer capitalism, enterprise culture and initiative, tradition, moral fortitude and decency. In Thatcher's own words, "economics are the method: *the object is to change the soul*" (p. 129, my emphasis).

For Hall (1988a), the deftness (or, alternately, the tragedy) of Thatcherism was its ability to blend economic theory with a stridently populist language rooted in the lived experience of the ordinary Briton: "Thatcherism discovered a powerful means of translating economic doctrine into the language of experience, moral imperative, and common sense, thus providing a 'philosophy' in the broader sense – an alternative ethic to that of the 'caring society'" (p. 47).

The Thatcherite "project" was to "ground neoliberal policies directly in an appeal to 'the people'; to root them in the essentialist categories of commonsense experience and practical moralism" (Hall, 1988a, p. 71). Indeed, studies of electoral demography have revealed that Thatcher's electoral successes were almost exclusively down to her appeal among the working class, among people who ostensibly should have been voting Labour (Heath, Jowell, & Curtice, 1991).

Thatcher's influence was to shape the political culture for years to come, which made Stuart Hall's (1988a) claim that Thatcherism "organize[d] the ideological terrain" (p. 91) and "shifted the parameters of common sense" (p. 188) seem somewhat prophetic.

Scholars have argued that neoliberalism has become hegemonic because it has seemingly won the consent of the governed and become an unquestionable economic order, becoming the commonsensical organizing force that cuts across all dimensions of the sociopolitical landscape (Fairclough, 1992, 2000a, 2002, 2003; Fenton, 2011; McKnight, 2003; Phelan, 2007a, 2007b). The state, on the other hand, becomes something of a pariah; bloated, inefficient, and overly paternalistic, its intervention "deemed undesirable because it... conspires against both efficiency and liberty" (Munck, 2005, p. 61). Neoliberalism is, simply, the "ideology that the market can do



no wrong” (McChesney, 2004b, p. 45). Given that ideology acts as an adhesive to bind together the social order, the success of neoliberalism as an economic and political doctrine is dependent on its ability to gather traction and gain support among the polity:

Markets expressed the popular will more articulately and more meaningfully than did mere elections. Markets conferred democratic legitimacy; markets were a friend of the little guy; markets brought down the pompous and the snooty; markets gave us what we wanted; markets looked out for our interests (Frank, 2000, pp. *xiv-xv*).

By tying markets to notions of freedom and choice, advocates of neoliberalism are able to create a seemingly irresistible narrative, that “the market is not only the most efficient way to allocate resources but also the optimum context to achieve human freedom” (Munck, 2005, p. 65). For Saad-Filho and Johnson (2005), “neoliberalism is everywhere both the outcome and the arena of social conflicts. It sets the political and economic agenda, limits the possible outcomes, biases expectations, and imposes urgent tasks on those challenging its assumptions, methods and consequences (p. 4). The historian Perry Anderson (2002) has described neoliberalism as “the most successful ideology in world history” (p. 17).

Neoliberalism’s success has not been without a price, however. For Duménil and Lévy (2005), neoliberalism has wrought great damage on the British economic and social fabric, being “beneficial to a few and detrimental to many” (p. 13). Since 1979, the share of incomes has become progressively unbalanced; the share of income by the top 10 percent has continually increased, while the share of the bottom decile has almost halved in the same period of time (Arestis & Sawyer, 2005; Irvin, 2008; Rapley, 2004). Britain has become a “savagely divided country” (Leadbeter, 1989, p. 140) as a result. For Milios (2005), neoliberalism represents a naked power grab by capital:

Neoliberalism is neither a “correct” policy for economic reform and development, nor an “erroneous” policy of certain governments, which could be amended through reasonable argumentation and discussion. It is a class policy, aiming at reshuffling the relations of forces between capital and labor on all social levels to the benefit of capital; it is a class offensive of capital against labor (p. 212).

Of concern to communication scholars is how neoliberalism is presented as the natural and immutable order of things. Its practical manifestations – tight control over the money supply, privatization of public utilities, sharp public spending cuts, and the erosion of trade union rights, for example – coalesce around the narrative that the market is the *only* rational approach to organizing society.

### **“No Special Favors”: The Trade Unions and New Labour**

Thatcherism threw the Labour Party into disarray after the party lost the 1983 general election, its second successive electoral loss and the second worst electoral defeat in its history. Neil Kinnock, elected Labour leader following the defeat, set about reforming the party to make it “electable” (Heffernan & Marqusee, 1992), and the majority of trade unions were key supporters of Kinnock’s program (Chadwick & Heffernan, 2003; Heffernan, 2001). Following another catastrophic loss in the 1987 election, Kinnock set about a systematic policy review that operated under the assumption that “only a clean break with the party’s ideological past would make it electable” (Crewe, 1993, p. 24). The review led to the abandonment of several long-term Labour policies, among them opposition to Thatcher’s trade union reforms (Seyd, 1993). Indeed, Labour’s association with the trade unions was deemed by the party leadership to be one of the factors making the party “unelectable” in this period (Leys, 1990; MacArthur, 1989; Minkin,

1986, 1992; Seyd, 1993). For Chadwick & Heffernan (2003), “the idea that Labour was in thrall to the trade unions... had to be banished from popular perception” (p. 14). However, Labour proceeded to lose the 1992 election (albeit by a closer margin) to a John Major-led Conservative Party, leading to Kinnock’s resignation. Following the brief leadership of John Smith, Tony Blair was elected leader of the Labour Party in 1994 upon Smith’s untimely death.

Blair took up the task of reform with a zeal that arguably out-stripped Kinnock’s, culminating in the re-branding of the party as “New Labour,” which Blair declared was “literally a new party” (quoted in Fielding, 2000, p. 368). Blair pushed through a major reform of the party program, abandoning Clause IV of Labour’s constitution. Clause IV had committed Labour to the nationalization of industry and its abandonment was claimed by supporters of Blair as the apex in the “modernization” process of the Labour Party, and a sign that Labour had come to terms with Thatcherism and the market economy (Rawnsley, 2001). New Labour drew heavily on Anthony Giddens’ (1994, 1998, 2001) notion of the “third way,” a synthesis of traditional left- and right-wing positions. Giddens (1998) locates the third way between social democracy and neoliberalism: “the overall aim of third way politics should be to help citizens pilot their way through the major revolutions of our time: globalization, transformations in personal life, and our relationship to nature” (p. 27). Third way advocates argue that the need for an alternative political framework and a rejection of the dogma of old is the result of the major changes in society in the 1980s. To that extent, the third way can be seen as a new political paradigm (Brivati, 1997). For Giddens (1998), “social democratic parties no longer have a consistent ‘class bloc’ on which to rely. Since they can’t depend upon their previous identities, they have to create new ones in a socially and culturally more diverse environment” (p. 23). Instead of challenging the dominance of the market, the political center left must accommodate itself to the reality that

“no-one any longer has any alternatives to capitalism – the arguments that remain concern how far, and in what ways, capitalism should be governed and regulated” (Giddens, 1998, pp. 43–44).

The third way is not without its critics, who allege that it purports to resolve a series of struggles between left and right but in fact accommodates itself to neoliberalism and leaves the neoliberal doctrine unchallenged. While the third way “seeks to humanize the market” it is premised on the acceptance of “the major theoretical tenets of neoliberalism regarding income distribution and the stability of capitalist economies” (Palley, 2005, p. 28). Therefore the third way, and New Labour, can best be understood as an adaptation to the ideological terrain carved out by Thatcherism. Instead of proposing a counter-hegemonic project that challenges the view that markets are the route to material, political, and emotional fulfillment, New Labour accepted neoliberalism and treated it as orthodoxy. New Labour is therefore best understood as “a consolidation of, rather than a radical departure from, Thatcherism” (Howell, 2005, p. 134). For Fairclough (2000b), New Labour presents neoliberalism as “something with which we have to live” (p. *viii*) and “a given and irreversible fact of life” (p. 28). That New Labour twisted itself into the political contours shaped by Thatcherism and accepted “the considerable extent of the Thatcherite legacy” (Hay, 1999, p. 35) is supported by assertions in official party documents that it would be “business, not government, that creates prosperity” (Labour Party, 1997, p. 1) and “any unnecessary outdated regulation” would go (Labour Party, 1996, p. 12). This Damascene conversion was reflected in the fact that “political values preached by Conservative ministers – enterprise, self-reliance, anti-statism – found contemporary reflection in the speeches of [New] Labour ministers” (Heffernan, 2001, p. 65). Indeed, Peter Mandelson, a key figure in the creation of New Labour, asserted that the task for New Labour in the 1990s was to “move forward from where Margaret Thatcher left off, rather than... dismantle every single thing she did”

(Mandelson & Liddle, 1996, p. 1), while Blair himself contended that some of Thatcher's reforms were "necessary acts of modernization" (Blair, 1998, p. 5).

New Labour thus represents a transformation of "the underlying ideological assumptions" that comprise the party's intellectual and philosophical scaffolding (Chadwick & Heffernan, 2003, p. 1). For Howell (2005), New Labour "emerged out of a long and bitter conflict within the party about how best to respond to both political defeat and the changes economic and social landscape of the British political economy at the end of the twentieth century" (p. 174), a conflict that ultimately the "modernizers" and "reformers" undoubtedly won. The signifier "New" is indicative of a new ideological formation undergirding the party, positioning the party as a new creation free of the uncomfortable ideological baggage of history and, simultaneously, positioning all that came before it as "Old Labour," which, whether stated or implicit, became immediately anachronistic and inferior, including the trade unions.

Trade unions awaiting the return of "business-as-usual" would find themselves sorely disappointed in 1997, with a New Labour government that seemed all happy to keep them at a distance. Believing that the unions were a hindrance to electoral success, New Labour asserted its distance, with Blair exhorting that under a Labour government "Britain will [retain] the most restrictive trade union laws anywhere in the western world," promising to "leave intact the main changes of the 1980s in industrial relations and enterprise" (Heffernan, 2001, p. 23). The 1997 general election manifesto declared straightforwardly that Thatcher's trade union legislation would remain in place under Labour and that the unions could expect "no favors from a Labour government." Despite the formal relationship between the two groups, "the trade unions would be consulted by a future Labour government only in the same way as other groups" (Seyd, 1998, p. 62), meaning that trade unions would be treated as just another special interest group rather

than the institutionalized representative of waged labor. According to Crouch (2001), the distinction was ideological, for New Labour believed “class conflict to be old-fashioned” (p. 106). Blair declared an end to “class warfare,” exclaiming “we’re all middle class now” at a Labour think tank conference (quoted in Jones, 2011, p. 139), mirroring sociological trends that saw less people identify as “working class,” despite significant gaps in income and wealth inequality (Savage, 2000; Wills, 2008).

While New Labour enacted several measures supported by trade unions, such as placing into a law a statutory national minimum wage and recognizing the ability to join a trade union as a human right, the party exhibited an overall reluctance to challenge the neoliberal consensus that marginalizes trade unions as legitimate economic actors, leading Crouch (2001) to allege that “in the industrial relations field New Labour represents a continuation of the neoliberalism of the Conservative government but one required to make more concessions than its predecessor with trade unions and social democratic policy preferences” (p. 104). Despite repeated calls that trade unions should formally disaffiliate, many unions have remained part of the Labour Party. Indeed, they have functioned as supporters of the leadership on occasion, such as when union votes helped Tony Blair avoid embarrassing defeats on a number of policy issues at party conference and in ensuring Blair got the candidates he wanted selected for the London Mayoralty and Welsh Assembly (Ludlam, 2001). According to Reid (2000), “the unions have tended to adopt a pragmatic approach to the Labour Party: above all they have wanted it to be in government, and they have been more ready than most politicians to be recognize and abandon unpopular policies” (p. 222). Ultimately, however, New Labour made good on its word and exited office in 2010 with Thatcher’s trade union legislation still on the statute books. The lack of enthusiasm for industrial reform led Chadwick and Heffernan (2003) to assert that “the divide

between the supposed ‘political’ and ‘industrial’ wings of the [labor] movement was never as starkly pronounced as... in [the] era of New Labour” (p. 5). According to Taylor (2005), the scale of the distance New Labour placed between itself and the trade unions may be insurmountable for years to come, and, indeed, permanent.

### **Trade Unions and the British Media**

The British press, particularly the tabloids, has been notoriously hostile to organized labor, with “union-bashing” being “one of the conventions of the British media” (Seaton, 1982, p. 272; see also Curran, Gaber, & Petley, 2005; Heffernan & Marqusee, 1992; Thomas, 2005; Tunney, 2004). According to MacShane (1987), “the media occupy a special place reserved for the left’s most hated demons” (p. 216), while Sparks (2006) references – in somewhat tongue-in-cheek fashion – the “old and honorable tradition in the labor movement that, if you want some applause, you attack the capitalist media” (p. 111). The tabloid newspapers in particular have long been opposed to trade unions, a deeply ironic fact given that “the ‘fairest’ and fullest coverage of trade unions appears in the serious newspapers, whereas the least and least fair coverage appears in those very papers read by four-fifths of the population and by most trade union members” (Tunstall, 1983, p. 145). This is problematic if one considers the economic structure of the British press, which has seen attempts to create newspapers more favorable to organized labor fail (Chippendale & Horrie, 1988; McKay & Barr, 1976). For McGregor (1977), “there is no doubt that over most of this century the labor movement has had less newspaper support than its right-wing opponents and that its beliefs and activities have been unfavorably reported by the majority of the press” (p. 99). Given the relationship between the trade unions and the Labour Party, this means that “the national press has never reflected the political

attitudes of a large – often a major – sector of the population in any representative degree since the rise of the Labour Party after the 1914-18 war” (Baistow, 1985, p. 3). In other words, the public interest is not served by the narrow band of accounts offered by the British press. The labor movement, particularly in a time of historic weakness, can hardly organize itself sufficiently to combat inaccurate and biased media representations, given that it lacks the material resources to do so (Manning, 1999; Schlesinger, 1990).

In a study of trade union activity in the 1970s, Young and Crutchley (1977) found that despite an array of forces external to the workplace driving profits down, the easy referent point for the media was trade unionists: “Media spokesmen see this dislocation not in the protracted international currency crisis or in rising world food prices but in the star-struck militants who devilishly lead common folk astray” (p. 27). Scholars have argued that trade unions were depicted in this period as the sole reason for Britain’s economic decline, ignoring wider trends in the global economy (Hartley, 1982; Hay, 1996a; Seaton, 1982). In short, “the problems of an economic system are... reduced to the irresponsible actions of trade unionists” (Philo, Beharrell, & Hewitt, 1977, p. 20). According to the Glasgow University Media Group (1980):

Industrial reporting relies on the assumption that industrial disputes are about “trouble” – trouble for us as customers, commuters, and members of the public, trouble for the managers of industry, trouble for the nation; but never trouble for the workers involved (p. 401).

Mediated representations reinforce the view that trade unions are a narrow, sectional, and self-serving special interest group concerned only with the interests of their members and not those of the British public (Glasgow University Media Group, 1982; Hay, 1996a).



Nowhere is this clearer than in media depictions of, and referrals to, the aforementioned winter of discontent, which remains “the dominant form in which any public sector strike threat is constructed in Britain” (Howell, 2005, p. 143). Media representations of the winter of discontent emphasized the argument – presented as fact – that this was a crisis of the state, with hysterical headlines like “They Won’t Even Let Us Bury Our Dead” and “1,000 Could Die Every Day” used to describe strike action by undertakers and nurses respectively (Hay, 1996a, pp. 262-265). By emotionalizing and personalizing the issue, newspapers presented trade unionists as “evil other[s]” acting out of narrow self-interest (Hay, 1996a, p. 263). Newspapers presented the strike action in stark, combative terms, with the public cast as the victims of trade union indulgence, as headlines like “Our Monday of Misery” (Hay, 1996a, p. 268) and “Britain Under Siege” (Hay, 1996a, p. 270) attest. Ultimately, news media coverage “undermined broad public support for trade unionism” (Howell, 2005, p. 144) by framing the issue in such stark, threatening terms.

### **Context to Analyzed Strikes**

As discussed in Chapter One, this study examines tabloid newspaper representations of four strikes – the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) strike of 2002-2003, the Communication Workers Union (CWU) strikes of 2007 and 2009-2010, and the Lindsey Oil Refinery strike of 2009. In this section, I provide background detail for ease of reader understanding, summarizing the circumstances surrounding the dispute, when it was called, how it progressed, and how it was resolved.

### **The FBU Strike, 2002-2003**

The strikes by the FBU in late 2002 were the first by firefighters since the 1970s (BBC News, 2002b). The basis of the strike was the rejection of a 39% increase in pay, which would have brought the average firefighter's wage to approximately £30,000. The argument put forward by the FBU was that their members were deserving of a wage that reflected the dangers of their job. The union had rejected an offer of 11% over two years, put forward by a review board (BBC News, 2002b). The strike began on Wednesday, November 13, initially for a two-day period. When talks broke down, further strikes were called. Waves of strikes would continue through June 12, 2003, with the FBU accepting a pay increase of 16% over three years, linked to changes in working conditions. The settlement saw qualified firefighters' wage increasing from £21,500 to £25,000 (BBC News, 2004). During the strike periods, the armed forces provided emergency cover, with the strike taking place at the same time as the build-up to the Iraq War (BBC News, 2002a). The strikes were condemned by Deputy Prime Minister (and Deputy Leader of the Labour Party) John Prescott as "wholly irresponsible" (BBC News, 2004). The FBU disaffiliated from the Labour Party following the strike (Tempest, 2004, June 17).

### **The CWU strikes, 2007 and 2009**

The 2007 CWU strike was the result of a dispute between the union and the Royal Mail over "modernization" plans that the Royal Mail claimed were essential to the competitiveness of the company but which the CWU argued would lead to 40,000 job losses. The plans included reforms to working hours, pay, pensions, and work conditions (BBC News, 2007b) One of the major issues of the strike was disagreement over employee job roles, with the Royal Mail putting forward proposals to have staff occupy multiple roles over the course of a day's work and the CWU arguing for clear delineation of labor. On June 7, 2007, CWU members voted 77.5% in

favor of industrial action after the union rejected an offer from the Royal Mail (BBC News, 2007a). There were waves of strikes from June 29 through October 11, 2007, when a settlement was reached. In the intervening period, the Royal Mail had obtained an injunction prohibiting strike action after claiming the union had not provided the company with accurate figures regarding the number of staff affected by the strike (BBC News, 2007c), a legal requirement as a result of the Thatcher industrial reforms. However, a settlement was reached on October 12, averting future strike action and a prolonged court battle (BBC News, 2007c).

The CWU called another strike 2009, also over the issue of “modernization.” In this instance, the union argued that the Royal Mail’s reforms would lead to a lack of job security for its members. Central to the strike was the accusation by the CWU that the Royal Mail had gone back on its word regarding the settlement that ended the 2007 strikes (“Postal workers go on strike in London and Scotland,” 2009, June 19). In particular, the union was fearful about the introduction of new sorting technology that they argued would lead to redundancies (BBC News, 2009j). On October 8, CWU members voted three to one in favor of strike action over job security and working conditions (BBC News, 2009h). Strikes took place on October 22 and 23, followed by another period of strike action on October 29, 30, and 31. Negotiations were marred by the leaking of a Royal Mail document stating the company would achieve its aims “with or without union engagement” (BBC News, 2009i). On November 5, the union called off strikes to allow for negotiations (BBC News, 2009k), and a settlement was reached between the CWU chiefs and Royal Mail executives on March 8, 2010 (BBC News, 2010). The deal saw a 6.9% pay rise over three years (Lea, 2010, March 9), with the Royal Mail agreeing to keep 75% of the workforce as full-time staff, reduce working hours from 40 to 39 hours per week, while the CWU agreed to the use of new sorting technology (BBC News, 2010). It was estimated that there

was a backlog of 50 million letters and packages as a result of the failure of talks (“Postal union deciding whether to strike again,” 2009, November 5).

### **The Lindsey Oil Refinery Strikes, 2009**

The 2009 Lindsey Oil Refinery strikes are unique among the strikes analyzed here as they were unofficial or “wildcat” strikes. The event that precipitated the strikes was the dismissal of workers at the Lindsey Oil Refinery, when the company that owned the refinery, Total, awarded a £200m contract to build a hydro desulphurization unit at the site to an Italian firm, which brought in over 300 Italian workers to complete the project (BBC News, 2009b). The action by Total saw oil refinery workers across Britain go on “sympathy” strike, an action made illegal by the Thatcher reforms of the 1980s. The debate centered on the use of non-British workers, with an officer of the Unite union arguing, “There is sufficient unemployed, skilled labour wanting the right to work on that site and they are demanding the right to work on that site” (BBC News, 2009b), and workers citing Prime Minister Gordon Brown’s pledge of “British jobs for British workers,” given in a recent Labour Party conference speech (BBC News, 2009b). This strike brought to the fore the issue of foreign workers being employed in the United Kingdom under the European Union’s free movement of labor laws, which prohibit any EU member state from barring entry to a citizen from another EU member state seeking employment. The Unite union claimed that the bidding process was unfair, denying British workers the opportunity to apply for the posts (BBC News, 2009a), though a report by the Advisory, Conciliation, and Arbitration Service (ACAS), a quasi-government mediation body, ruled that the process was lawful (BBC News, 2009d).

On January 27, 2009, approximately 800 of Lindsey Oil Refinery’s local contractors took strike action, with subsequent strikes taking place across the country in solidarity with the

dismissed workers (BBC News, 2009b). A deal was struck on February 5 that saw 102 jobs created for British workers (BBC News, 2009c). However, the strike resumed on June 11 following the dismissal of 51 British employees (Weardon, 2009, June 11), followed once again by wildcat strikes across the country (BBC News, 2009e). On June 19, 2009, approximately 700 staff were dismissed from the Lindsey Oil Refinery and locked out of the plant (Stokes, 2009, June 19). Workers were invited to re-apply for their jobs under new conditions, which resulted in a protest outside the refinery and 3000 workers across the country again walking out in support (BBC News, 2009f). Talks between Total and the GMB union commenced, resulting in the reinstatement of 647 workers at Lindsey who had been dismissed for taking unofficial action, offers of alternative positions for the 51 workers dismissed, and assurances that the “sympathy strikers” would not suffer adverse consequences as a result of their actions (Jones, 2009, June 26). On June 29, 2009, refinery workers voted to accept the deal and returned to work (BBC News, 2009g).

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has situated trade unions within a historical narrative that arrives at their role in British public life at the end of the twentieth century, the starting point for this study’s analysis. The chapter provided a discussion of the relationship between trade unions and the British press and concluded with a short summary of the four strikes being examined in this study. Having established the premise of, and justification for, this study, grounded it in a theoretical framework of critical discourse analysis, and provided the essential context that helps explain how the trade union movement found itself in such perilous shape at the end of the

twentieth century, the next chapter discusses the method used to analyze the particular texts selected by this study.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### METHOD

In Chapter Three, I discussed the ontological and epistemological principles of critical discourse analysis. This established critical discourse analysis as a *theory*. The purpose of this chapter is to establish critical discourse analysis as a *method*. This chapter examines how the texts under scrutiny will be identified, obtained, and analyzed.

#### Identifying the Texts

As noted in Chapter Two, readership in the British newspaper market is segmented along socioeconomic lines. This means that scholars can examine how *specific topics* are represented by *specific newspapers* to *specific audiences*. This study is concerned with how the working class is represented to the working class. Therefore my concern is for those newspapers consumed chiefly by working class readers. One must also take into consideration the strength of a newspapers' readership. The three daily national newspapers with the largest readerships in the United Kingdom are, in order, the *Daily Mail*, *The Sun*, and the *Daily Mirror* (see Figure One, page eight). All of these newspapers are popular among working class readers (approximate to the C2 through E social grades, as described in Chapter One), with *Daily Mail* readers generally more "upwardly mobile" (Cole & Harcup, 2010, p. 31) than readers of the *Daily Mirror* or *The Sun*. A brief summary of these newspapers is useful at this stage.

#### **The *Daily Mail***

Founded in 1896, the *Daily Mail* is regarded as the very first tabloid newspaper. Its founding owner, Lord Northcliffe, appropriated the term from a pill manufacturer (a combination

of “tablet” and “alkaloid”). The term encapsulates Northcliffe’s vision for the newspaper: a small but effective pill providing a dosage of necessary information in compact form (Tulloch, 2000). The newspaper was significantly smaller than the popular newspapers of the age, allowing the reader to gain what Northcliffe described as an “outline of the day’s news... in sixty seconds” (quoted in Williams, 2010, p. 9). The *Daily Mail* was also the first mass circulation newspaper in the United Kingdom, with its circulation close to one million within four years of its launch (Engel, 1996). At the time of writing, the *Daily Mail* is the most popular newspaper in Britain in terms of daily sales (National Readership Survey, 2010). It has “complete dominance of their market sector,” its success due to its “embrace” of the changes in British class composition in the 1980s (Cole & Harcup, 2010, pp. 27-29). The *Mail* is included in this analysis because of its market share and its popularity among working class and lower middle class audiences.

### **The *Daily Mirror***

If the *Daily Mail* was born with a readership that set its eye toward climbing the social ladder (Conboy, 2002), the *Daily Mirror* emerged with a defiantly populist stance more amenable to left-of-center thought and grounded in the language of the working class (Engel, 1996). It was conceived as “a paper that will conveniently stuff into the pockets of overalls, and that can be read in brief intervals between manual work” (Smith, Immirzi, & Blackwell, 1975, p. 233). The newspaper passionately supported the Labour Party throughout the first half of the twentieth century and according to Conboy (2002), helped shape “a new paradigm: a daily popular newspaper that articulated the views and aspirations of the working classes and perfected a vernacular style which transmitted that solidarity” (p. 126). For Cole and Harcup (2010), the “brilliance” of the *Mirror* at this point in time lay in its ability to



inform comprehensibly and mostly without patronizing while at the same time being entertaining. It rarely talked down to its working class readership... [and] dealt with politics and work-related issues. It was the friend of organized labor... and of crowded football terraces where everybody stood... And it recognized, as many didn't then, that intelligence and reflection were not matters of social position (p. 24).

It was the *Mirror's* optimistic view of working class aspiration that led one scholar to describe it as “one of Britain's greatest radical papers” (Curran, 1997, p. 95). However, the story of the paper since the 1960s is one of decline in both standards and circulation, as the paper followed the example of the newcomer to the scene, *The Sun*, in chasing readers by pandering to the lowest common denominator (Cole & Harcup, 2010). An attempt to “return the Mirror to its former self” in the early 2000s – which put investigate journalism at center-stage, took an avowed stance in opposition to the Iraq War, and drastically cut down on celebrity news – saw circulation plummet, and the experiment came to an end after eighteen months (Cole & Harcup, 2010, p. 26).

### ***The Sun***

*The Sun* began as the *Daily Herald*, a socialist broadsheet. Once the biggest-selling newspaper in the country, by 1964 it was experiencing a nadir in sales and was re-launched as *The Sun* (Johansson, 2007). This was unsuccessful, leading to International Publishing Corporation selling the paper to Rupert Murdoch's News International in 1969. The re-formatting of *The Sun* under Murdoch led to an “all-tabloid endless circulation war” for blue-collar readership between it and the *Daily Mirror* (Tunstall, 1983, p. 85) with *The Sun* moving almost immediately in a politically rightward direction of travel (Conboy, 2002). *The Sun's* new ownership

did not share the *Mirror*'s aspirational view of the working man and his thirst for education but preferred instead to cater to his perceived (by the *Sun*) tastes for naked breasts, sexual innuendo (and activity), soap operas, military adventures and package holidays to Spain, and his distaste for scroungers, strikers, comers-in, and "toffs" (Cole & Harcup, 2010, p. 24).

According to McNair (1995), *The Sun* "claims to 'speak' for the conservative working classes, making it frequently racist, sexist, and anti-socialist, while at the same time irreverential and critical of the establishment" (p. 69). The newspaper adopted a stridently populist stance, aligning itself with the Conservative Party and crusading against

pedophiles, gays, feminists, trade unionists, lefties, social workers, anybody who finds its... soft porn distasteful, people who are too fat, too thin, too Muslim, too whatever, and of course asylum seekers – indeed, all foreigners with the exception of Australian-turned-American squillionaires called Rupert (Cole & Harcup, 2010, p. 129).

Within four years of the Murdoch takeover, *The Sun* had trebled its readership (Tunstall, 1983), but at the expense of quality and ethics. The newspaper became "relentlessly downmarket" (Williams, 2010, p. 197) and a "byword for the erosion of journalistic standards" (McGuigan, 1992, p. 177).

*The Sun* led the emergence of "an overwhelmingly partisan right-wing press" in the 1970s (Thomas, 2005, p. 2), leading to a deep imbalance in the politics of the British press that has remained since (Chippendale & Horrie, 1999; Cole & Harcup, 2010). The paper was an early supporter of Thatcher, and positioned itself as the voice of the "anti-union, conservative working class," realizing they were "a new political force" and, from the paper's perspective "a new circulation force" also (Cole & Harcup, 2010, p. 72). For Williams (2010), Thatcherism's core

themes of “individualism and self-interest” found common cause in the pages of *The Sun* (p. 197). Though the newspaper endorsed the Labour Party in the 1997 election, this was less a reorientation of *The Sun*’s political outlook than it was of Labour’s; indeed, *The Sun* supported Labour on the basis that “Tony Blair was worth supporting as the only credible conservative leader in the field” (quoted in Curran & Seaton, 2010, p. 75). It is worth noting that the headline for the endorsement was “*The Sun* backs Blair” – an implicit endorsement of the leader and not the party.

### **Obtaining the Texts**

Having identified the texts to be analyzed, the next step is to obtain them. The texts for this study were obtained using the Lexis-Nexis database, which houses a vast bank of newspaper articles from across the world. A disadvantage of using a database like LexisNexis instead of going to the original source material is that its representation of the articles, while retaining all the original text, does not include illustrations, which can often be useful as part of understanding the totality of a particular news report, and may reinforce themes within the article itself. However, LexisNexis is widely used by mass communication scholars and this slight weakness does not substantively inhibit the process of analysis, which is textual in nature. On the other hand, a major benefit of LexisNexis is that it enables scholars to isolate particular newspapers and particular timeframes, allowing the scholar to examine news media representations on a given topic with some degree of precision.

As mentioned in Chapter One, this study looks at representations of four major strikes: the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) strike of 2002-2003, the Communication Workers Union (CWU) strikes of 2007 and 2009, and the Lindsey Oil Refinery strike of 2009. The specifics of each

strike are discussed in Chapter Four. Beginning with the FBU strike, I used LexisNexis to search for articles published in the *Daily Mail*, *The Sun*, and the *Daily Mirror* using keywords pertaining to the strike (in this case, “Fire Brigades Union”). The timeframe for data included all reports published while the strike was ongoing but was expanded to include articles from one month before each strike officially began to one month after the strike ended. I expanded the timeframe because of the need to capture reports on the buildup to strike action (for example, negotiations and coverage of the issues prompting strike action) as well as residual post-strike commentary about the strike’s effects. Naturally, both the root causes of a strike can go back for far longer than one month. On a similar note, a strike’s effects could well last for much longer than one month after the strike’s completion. However, a one month “double bookend” seemed a logical “cutting-off” point in the interests of practicality and focus. The search was then repeated using pertinent keywords for the other strikes (“Communication Workers Union” and “Lindsey Oil Refinery” respectively) within the designated timeframes. This study is concerned with the totality of the tabloid discourse and therefore did not differentiate between commentary and “hard news” in the data gathering process. The only articles discounted were duplicate articles (where Lexis-Nexis returned two of the same article due to its classification as belonging to the morning or afternoon edition of the newspaper), rare instances where reports mentioned the keywords but only tangentially or not in sequence, and letters to the editor. The total number of articles analyzed is summarized in Figure Four.

**Figure 4: Summary of Data**

<b>Strike</b>	<b>Articles in <i>The Sun</i></b>	<b>Articles in the <i>Daily Mail</i></b>	<b>Articles in the <i>Daily Mirror</i></b>	<b>Total Articles Analyzed</b>
FBU, 2002-2003	89	105	145	<b>335</b>
Royal Mail, 2007	42	75	62	<b>179</b>
Royal Mail, 2009	50	67	63	<b>180</b>
Lindsey Oil Refinery, 2009	16	17	17	<b>50</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>197</b>	<b>264</b>	<b>287</b>	<b>744</b>

### **Analyzing the Texts**

When it comes to the “how” of critical discourse analysis, “there is rarely a clearly defined path for the researcher” and a shortage of “blueprints as to how ‘best’ to proceed” (Gillen & Peterson, 2005, p. 149). If one were to pluck five different CDA studies out of the literature, one may likely obtain five different methodological programs (even if all five share the same theoretical assumptions). In this study, I have opted to use a model developed by Carvalho (2008, pp. 167-172) that illustrates the mechanics of CDA in practical terms. CDA is concerned with linking text with context. In other words, CDA scholars must draw connections between specific texts – newspaper articles, speeches, advertisements, for example – and the broader sociopolitical context within which the text is situated and, in doing so, the underlying social power structures that the text feeds into. Carvalho’s model is attractive because it calls scholars to pay attention to both text and context and bring them together through the analysis process. Therefore, scholars are called to combine a *textual analysis* with a *contextual analysis*, to use Carvalho’s terminology. Carvalho does not propose this in a prescriptive manner, but

allows for scholars to approach particular texts and particular research questions in a manner that integrates the above in a holistic, rather than mechanistic, fashion.

### **Textual analysis**

A textual analysis focuses on the specific elements present in the text. The elements of a textual analysis are as follows:

**Layout and structural organization.** This refers to elements like the length of the article, where in the newspaper it is situated, its headline, and its opening paragraph. In focusing on these issues, scholars are determining how much space is given to the matter (and therefore how much detail) and what key words or themes are emphasized. Looking at these properties helps determine what elements are foregrounded and backgrounded; in other words, what elements of the report are given more “weight” than others. How the article is organized is important because it indicates to readers what is the most important element of the story and expresses, in principle if not necessarily in practice, what information needs to be recalled by readers as they formulate their opinion on matters of public importance (van Dijk, 1988).

**Objects.** Under Carvalho’s (2008) model, scholars are called to pay attention to the *objects* of a representation. This involves answering questions such as: What is being reported on? What is the theme or topic of the report or commentary? Carvalho uses the term “object” to indicate the active work of discourse in the social construction of reality. Carvalho argues that there may be several themes within a particular article. For example, an article covering a strike may on the one hand discuss important happenings pertaining the particular strike (when it is occurring, its size, its effects, and so on) but may also discuss the history of that particular union and its relationship with the government or employers, situate the strike in a broader historical framework, or discuss the strike’s relation to other strikes, be they past, present or yet to occur.

**Actors.** The third element to pay attention to is *actors*, i.e., who is *involved* in a particular report? In the case of this study, are particular individuals, such as trade union leaders, highlighted? How are they represented? How is their relationship to other actors (employers, the public, the state) represented? How prominent are these actors in relation to others? Does their representation lead to the backgrounding of other actors? Do these actors function as sources for journalists are they instead the subject of reporting (or both)? Do the perspectives of particular actors dominate? Who is depicted as possessing power and who is not?

**Language and grammar.** Here, scholars should be attuned to the specific textual choices such as the use of verbs, adjectives, and adverbs and how they convey meaning. Verbs indicate activity and the particular kind of verb used can have an impact on the implications generated (the difference between speaking, shouting, and yelling, for example). The function of adjectives and adverbs in language is to modify meaning, whether that to add clarity or to persuade. Moreover, the scholar should be concerned with the overall tone of the article – is it written in a formal or informal manner? Does it use humor or is it serious? Does it use inclusive language such as “we,” “us,” or “our”? These are all aspects of the social construction of meaning through language. Scholars should also be attuned to modality, the use of words to determine certainty (the difference, for example, between possible, likely, probably, and certainly).

**Discursive strategies.** Scholars should pay attention to the selection and composition of facts, how facts are arranged in an article, and what facts are excluded from the report. This is where the bulk of the social construction of reality is accomplished (Carvalho, 2008). A news report may present information that is entirely factual but the omission of key details may completely alter the meaning of the report, which may in turn impact public perception. The average reader would likely anticipate their newspaper to offer a full understanding and, barring

first-hand experience or the willingness to seek out multiple alternate sources of information, would not necessarily notice the absence of this information. This is not to suggest intentional or willfully malicious manipulation of information on the part of the journalist but the recognition that the placement of facts (and their displacement) changes meaning. For example, is one particular perspective privileged over another? What is taken for granted? Are statistics placed in context? What value judgments are made on the basis of the presented facts? Is information presented in a manner that indicates a narrative of conflict?

**Ideological standpoints.** This refers to explicit or implicit value claims made in the text. Does the text take an avowed stance against trade unions and position them as harmful or are its ideological implications more subtle? What are the implications for how society should be organized? What does the article have to say about the role of trade unions, the state, and employers? What kind of intervention should the government have in the workings of the economy? These are all ideological claims that can be generated by a particular article. Furthermore, the absence of a particular perspective is itself ideological. What possibilities are closed off? What alternatives to the dominant position are unexplored or diminished? How do the politics of the specific newspaper(s) come into play in the discourse?

### **Contextual analysis**

The above points comprise what Carvalho (2008) describes as a *textual* analysis. This is paired with a *contextual* analysis, which looks “beneath the surface,” so to speak, at how the text fits into a broader social schema. Contextual analyses are constituted by two features, which are as follows:

**Comparative-synchronic analysis.** Here, the scholar is called upon to cross-reference the text with other accounts to assess the validity of truth claims, going beyond the text to link it



to a wider social context. Is the representation offered by the newspaper borne out by the material reality? Are there any factually inaccurate claims? Scholars must be in a position to point out lies, omissions, and false presuppositions (Fairclough, 1995b). This illustrates the need for the scholar to possess a thorough understanding of the topic being analyzed as well as the necessity of possessing multiple sources of information to cross-reference the information provided in the text. By comparing the account offered in the text with synchronous accounts offered in, for example, government reports, official statistics, or policy documents, scholars are able to form their own construction of reality and speak to the truth claims (or lack thereof) in the text. At the most basic level, this requires the scholar to be attuned to the totality of the phenomena being studied.

**Historical-diachronic analysis.** According to Meyer (2005), “all discourses are historical and can therefore only be understood with reference to their context” (p. 15). The scholar is therefore called upon to place the representations they are examining into a broader political, social, economic, and political context and understand the role of these representations as part of a series of previous representations. How does this representation fit with previous representations? Does it depart in some major way? What does it suggest about society? What sense of “history” is offered? What claims does it make about the future? This calls on the scholar to play an interpretive role into placing these representations into a larger narrative.

### **Process of Analysis**

The process of analysis was as follows. First, I took what Hall (1975) has called a “long preliminary soak” (Hall, 1975, p. 15) in the data to get a flavor of the discourse and see how it fits together. This involved reading the texts in an “open-ended” fashion (Carvalho, 2008, p. 166)

rather than fitting them into a prescribed schema as one would for a quantitative content analysis, for example (cf. Berelson, 1966). Doing so allows themes to “emerge” from the data in a reflexive, inductive manner, in much the same way a typical reader of a newspaper would approach the topic. This was followed by a more systematic analysis, where each newspaper’s discourse on a particular strike was analyzed closely, looking for the traits and characteristics of news identified by Carvalho (2008), such as looking at key background and foregrounding techniques and discursive strategies used. For each strike, themes were generated through deep reading of the text, adhering to Carvalho’s framework, which were refined further with subsequent readings. Throughout, claims were checked and referenced with other accounts. The analysis process involved movement from a deep reading of the text to linkages between text and context, connecting these representations with others, with the literature, and with wider social processes.

The following four chapters are devoted to analyses of the disputes selected for study. The major findings are as follows: First, trade unions were represented as impediments to “modernization,” a term that was rarely defined but often demanded, which helped cast trade unions and their members as backward reactionaries and anachronisms in an age of neoliberalism. Second, trade unions were represented as bringers of chaos and destruction who posed a threat to the economy, public safety, and the wellbeing of society. Third, tabloid newspapers focused on the relationship between trade unions and the Labour Party (and Labour leaders in particular). Fourth, and finally, tabloid newspapers highlighted immigration as an issue that intersected with traditional industrial relations in complex ways.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **THE SUPREMACY OF MODERNIZATION**

A prominent theme throughout the discourse was the necessity of “modernization.” This was particularly prevalent in coverage of the fire and postal service strikes, which saw modernization presented as a necessity for the postal and fire services as part of the adaptation to neoliberal working practices that stress worker flexibility. Trade unions were in the firing line as a result of their opposition to modernization, and modernization became a tool for attacking the trade unions. Trade unions were constructed as anachronistic relics with no place in a dynamic, “modern” economy. The discourse is divided here into two sub-themes: (1) The definition (or lack thereof) of modernization; and (2) The clash between an ethos of service and an ethos of profit.

#### **Defining Modernization**

The term modernization was frequently used in tabloid newspaper discourse. The term hailed from official government and management statements. For example, Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott responded to the possibility of a strike by the FBU by saying “I have made clear that any pay rise above inflation must be linked to modernization” (Manning, 2002), while at the strike’s conclusion Prescott commented, “We have always said pay has to be linked to modernization of the fire service. Modernization will save more lives and lead to a better, more efficient service” (Manning, 2003). With regard to the CWU strike, the *Daily Mirror* reported that Royal Mail’s chief executive Adam Crozier “stressed the need for modernization” (Manning, 2007a) in a meeting with CWU leaders. Though tabloid newspapers were not the

originators of the term, they did tend to accept it uncritically, taking it as face value. Lacking clear definition, modernization became a convenient hook upon which various meanings could be hung depending on the issue at hand, and consequently a term with which to attack the trade unions. In the absence of firm definition, modernization could be approximated as a reflex position of “the opposite of whatever it is that the union is doing.”

Modernization is, of course, a highly subjective term; one person’s standards of modernity may not necessarily align with another’s. It is also a highly loaded term, for, after all, who would not wish to be modern? If something is presented as modern, I would contend that our natural instinct would be to be favorable toward it. Antonyms of “modern” include such unattractive terms as “old-fashioned” and “outdated,” to name just two examples. On the contrary, synonyms of modern include “contemporary,” “current,” “fresh,” and “innovative.” Modernization is something to be desired and worked toward; there is no utility in being stuck in the past, with out-of-date practices; we need to be modern to keep up with the demands of life if we are not to fall behind. Thus, when the term modern is used *sans* definition, it paints a particular perspective, approach, or practice as innately attractive and desirable. In the neoliberal era, it becomes all-too-easy to present acquiescence to the demands of global capital as modern and an insistence on the rights of workers as quaint, reactionary, or antiquated. Through simple word choice – and accepting the word choices of management in an uncritical fashion – neoliberalism is painted as favorable, before a single picket line has been formed in anger, and trade unions are cast as heavy, unwanted anchors keeping the economy trapped in a bygone model of workplace organization.

This was very clear in tabloid newspaper discourse on the FBU and CWU strikes. With reference to the FBU strike, the firefighters were variously described as being “stuck in the

seventies” (Walters, 2002), following “archaic” (*Daily Mail*, 2002, November 14) and “old-fashioned” (*The Sun*, 2002, November 14) work practices that “defy common sense” (*The Sun*, 2002, November 28). Peter Hitchens of the *Mail on Sunday* branded the FBU “useless,” arguing that the union should be “put in a museum” (Hitchens, 2002). A *Daily Mail* op-ed headline exclaimed, “We Must Ditch the 1947 Manual” (Ord, 2002), indicating a union that is stuck in the past (in fact, stuck in the era of the aforementioned post-war consensus, which Thatcherism systematically dismantled) and refusing to enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Such a theme was developed in an editorial in *The News of the World*, the Sunday sister newspaper of *The Sun*, “Many people... will find it difficult to understand why the union refuses to break working practices that make no sense at all in the 21st century” (*News of the World*, 2002, November 24). Another article quoted Tony Blair’s “official spokesman” to develop the notion further:

If people think that the Government and the country can be held to ransom through strike action, can be bounced through uncosted, half-baked proposals in the middle of the night with little or no mention of modernization – proposals that at a cursory estimate by the Treasury would cost hundreds of millions of pounds – they are not living in the real world (Hughes, 2002a).

Here, any proposal on the part of the trade unions must take into account modernization, which is defined by the government, while trade unions are described as “not living in the real world.” The marginalization of particular possibilities is demonstrated in a quote from Labour’s Nick Raynsford, who said he could not believe that any “reasonable person” would refuse the government’s offer (*Daily Mirror*, 2003, March 13).

Those who have power have the ability to determine what is and what is not reasonable, and what constitutes “living in the real world.” Though in many cases this rhetoric comes from

the government, we can see the construction of common sense at work; by casting trade unions as belonging to a previous century, newspapers articulated the point that trade unionism no longer belongs, or at least not in its present form. Trade unions are depicted as problematic and noisy relics, dinosaurs of another time and place that has long been consigned to the dustbin of history. The 1970s was frequently referenced in tabloid newspaper discourse; this is notable because this is the last decade where trade unions can be truly considered to have been powerful. We know from history that the Thatcher governments brought a curtain down on this era in dramatic fashion, and the practices that the FBU were insistent on maintaining were simply not “commonsensical” in the neoliberal era. Newspapers defined the margins of possibility and policed its boundaries, offering no explanations as to why particular practices made “no sense at all.” This was, simply, hegemony in action.

This was also true of the coverage of the CWU strikes. For example, the *Daily Mail* attacked the CWU for “behaving like a dinosaur blind to the realities of the modern world and fragile state of the economy” (*Daily Mail*, 2009, October 17). Dinosaurs are, of course, extinct. The implication is that trade unions do not belong on the twenty-first century economic landscape, and just as dinosaurs once died out, so too must trade unions (or, at least, be “modernized” beyond all recognition). The Chairman of the Royal Mail Allan Leighton offered the following assessment of the position of the company *vis-à-vis* its relationship with its workforce:

Change is difficult for everyone – but we have no option but to become a modern, efficient business if we are to compete and thrive. Every day we delay change – and every day we have strike action – damages our ability to make that happen (*Daily Mail*, 2007, June 8).

Leaving aside the implication of a simpleton workforce too stuck-in-its-ways to grasp that they need to change those ways, Leighton's quote illustrates the position trade unions are in under neoliberalism. There is no resistance to neoliberalism; it is presented as a necessity and its exigencies are presented as material fact. To fight it is a hopeless cause; there is simply "no option." Strike action is depicted as an impediment to modernization. However, modernization is a highly loaded and subjective term. What is modern to management may not necessarily be modern to the workforce (we need only look at job displacement over centuries due to technological innovation as evidence of this). Leighton's comments were echoed by those of a non-executive director of the Royal Mail, who claimed there will not "be a future unless Royal Mail modernizes. I don't think the management can give in. If we do we are saying we are not going to compete with our competitors" (Poulter & Martin, 2007).

Tabloid newspaper coverage of the CWU strikes was replete with quotations from anonymous Royal Mail spokespersons and representatives, each extolling the virtues of modernization. For example, Royal Mail representatives stated that the company was "losing business because [it had] not yet modernized" (*The Sun*, 2007, June 28), that the CWU was "ignoring the absolute need to modernize" (Coney, 2007), and that the company's staff must face the "harsh commercial realities of the market" (*The Sun*, 2007, July 28). Another spokesperson put aside the other issues at stake by telling the newspaper that "the dispute is about the absolutely urgent need to modernize" (McGhie, 2007). The dispute is not about staff cuts, wage cuts, pension provision cuts. It is not even about reforms to work practices. The debate was solely about the need to modernize, and to modernize as a point of absolute urgency at that. This was best summarized in the following excerpt from an op-ed in *The Sun* penned by the Royal Mail's chief executive Adam Crozier, who stated, "We are determined to keep on modernizing.

We know if we all work together we can build a modern company with a great future. We can't let the CWU's death-wish strikes scupper that plan” (Crozier, 2009b). The CWU was positioned in Crozier’s article as the sole impediment to modernization and the force that is preventing the Royal Mail from achieving its “great future.” Instead, the CWU is stuck in the not-so-glorious past, unwilling to cooperate with management to lead the company to greatness. Of course, industrial disputes, like any dispute, require two parties. However, only the CWU were depicted as being intransigent.

That the neoliberal workplace is upon us was presented as a *fait accompli* – the only question was how long trade unions can hold out. One report stated matter-of-factly, “firemen will today be told their outdated shift practices will be axed by next summer” (Pascoe-Watson, 2002). That these practices are “outdated” was presented as an uncontroversial point. This notion permeated the discourse on the firefighters and postal workers strikes. “One thing is for sure,” waxed one *Daily Mail* columnist about the FBU strike, “things can never go back to the way they were before the strike” (Ord, 2002). Now that battle lines had been drawn, it was modernization or bust. Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott was reported vowing to “get tough with militant firefighters – by insisting that he would FORCE them to modernize” (Rae, 2002). A lone former firefighter was handily wheeled out to speak for the modernizers’ cause, exclaiming “the only way forward is modernization” (Nelson, 2002) in one of the few instances where either the *Daily Mail* or *The Sun* presented the views of anybody with firefighting experience. According to *The People*, the sister Sunday newspaper of the *Daily Mirror*, “when it comes to working practices, *no change is no option*” (*The People*, 2002, November 24, my emphasis), reinforcing the notion that there is no alternative to neoliberalism. This is because trade unions are on the wrong side of history:



Jobs *will* have to go and firefighters *will* have to accept work efficiency reforms. They risk waving goodbye to the cushy lifestyle which they have thrust into the spotlight by taking strike action over their massive pay claim (Kavanagh, 2002a, my emphasis).

This quote, from the news section of *The Sun*, depicted the decline of the union as inevitable.

This was also true of the postal workers strike, as Royal Mail chief executive Adam Crozier commented in a *Sun* op-ed: “Change is hard for everyone, but modernizing to become more efficient isn’t a choice – it’s the ONLY option if Royal Mail is to survive” (Crozier, 2009a).

Notably, a union representative was not invited to supply a rebuttal to Crozier’s perspective, with undergirded the point that there truly is no alternative. Another representative from the Royal Mail commented, “The union really doesn’t want to lose face and admit we need to modernize” (Walker & Kisiel, 2009). The union was presented as the group that was in denial, unable or unwilling to accept the reality of modernization.

Throughout the discourse, the mantra of modernization took on an almost intoxicating quality, with *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail* in particular pounding the drumbeat of the market. According to *The Sun*, “If Royal Mail pulls together and concentrates on customers, these changes could put money into postmen's pockets as well as giving Royal Mail the chance to become world class” (*The Sun*, 2007, June 8). The implication is that the Royal Mail is a second-rate organization whose members are more concerned with leaving for the nearest picket line than attend to the needs of customers. In their coverage of the FBU strike, the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun* juxtaposed a dynamic, forward-thinking government against a militant, reactionary union, with the former looking to the future and the latter stuck in the past. Take, for example, the following quote from a *Daily Mail* report: “Negotiators stressed... that the package would be tied to the militant Fire Brigades Union signing up to sweeping modernization and efficiency

changes which it has so far ruled out” (Eastham, 2002a). The juxtaposition is clear: Innocent “negotiators” versus stubborn “militants”; Modern versus antiquated; Efficient versus inefficient, and so on. In positioning the union as digging its heels in and resisting modernization, tabloid newspapers turned the union into a figure deserving of public scorn.

A *News of the World* editorial summarized the key point of contention: “This dispute... is about modernization. It is about the FBU refusing to do what every other worker in the public sector has had to do over the years – accept modern, more efficient working practices” (*News of the World*, 2002, November 24). Modernization meant falling in line with the neoliberal order and succumbing to the “realities of the marketplace,” as one Royal Mail spokesman describes it (Manning, 2007c). Such a reality would include favorable working conditions for staff being eliminated, pay being cut, and overly generous pensions being scaled back. The chief executive of rival firm DX provided his take on the strike in a *Daily Mail* report, commenting that the strike

is like a throwback to the 1970s. Postmen and women do a hard and physical job in all weathers but the working practices are seriously out of date. They are paid 25 per cent more than the market rate, plus they have the benefit of a final salary pension scheme. If postal workers were in a truly competitive market they would not be getting any pay rise (*Daily Mail*, 2007, June 8).

The guarantees of working for a public service in the public sector are considered unfair and uncompetitive, reflective of an ideological view that insists on driving wages, pensions, and standards downward in an effort to cut costs and generate profit. That the Royal Mail is in the public sector is irrelevant; it must fall in line with the orthodoxy and operate like its free market brethren. According to Conservative Shadow Industry Secretary Alan Duncan, “increasing

competition in the postal services market is a reality the CWU needs to deal with” (King, 2007a), while *The Sun* pointed out that the Royal Mail’s historic public sector status didn’t make it “immune from change” (*The Sun*, 2007, June 8). The modern workplace is presented as one that does as much as possible for as little cost as possible, with rights accrued over many decades of labor movement struggle needing to be junked. The idealized vision of the modern worker is of one that checks his or her rights at the door and embraces the flexibility that characterizes contemporary capitalism.

Several of the articles pertaining to the CWU strike discussed how the strike would only backfire on the union because of the Royal Mail’s fragile financial position. As fewer and fewer people send letters, the Royal Mail had by that point become more and more dependent on business contracts. These contracts were, the newspapers wrote, imperiled by strike action that would prompt “business customers [to go] elsewhere” (Manning, 2007c) According to Royal Mail’s chief executive, Adam Crozier, the strike would compound the “very difficult competitive challenges” facing the organization, possibly hastening its demise (Poulter, 2007a) as its customers turned to the private sector, where there was less likelihood of worker unionization, to complete their orders. According to David Frost, director-general of the British Chamber of Commerce, the strike would “act as a further spur to small businesses to adopt e-commerce, which will mean less mail” (*Daily Mail*, 2007, June 8). *The Sun* pointed out that the strike “will severely hurt Royal Mail” as it “lose[s] more business to rivals” (*The Sun*, 2007, June 8). For the union, the strike was a lose-lose situation, for “wildcat action is destroying public sympathy” (Shanahan, 2007). Public opinion data was shown to be unfavorable regarding the strike action, prompting this response from one columnist: “The postal workers believe their strikes are just. You the public believe they are ‘just’ as well – just annoying. When the public is

inconvenienced, sympathy is in short supply” (Holmes, 2007). According to the *Daily Mail*, “The reputation of Royal Mail is continuing to be hit. An agreement needs to be reached soon or yet more customers will seek alternative solutions for their postal needs” (*Daily Mail*, 2007, September 21). With the Royal Mail unwilling to bend in negotiations, a strike was depicted as futile: “A strike will mean there will be less pay, fewer jobs, worse pensions, and a bleak future for Royal Mail. Dark Ages stuff” (*The Sun*, 2007, June 8). According to this newspaper, “strikes don’t stop change, they just make it much more painful for everyone” (*The Sun*, 2007, June 8). This begs the question: If a union cannot go on strike in defense of its members’ pay, job security, and conditions, then what is the point of a union at all?

Perhaps understandably, the unions concerned rejected the charge that they were obstacles to modernization, namely because they offered a different definition of modernization. This was particularly notable in the CWU strike. For example, Deputy General Secretary of the CWU Dave Ward stressed how the union was “not opposed in any shape or form to modernization. What Royal Mail is doing is not modernization. The truth is they are intent on cutting services, cutting jobs and cutting pay” (Poulter, 2007a). Interviewed about the 2009-2010 CWU strike, Ward reiterated the point: “Royal Mail has never really been engaged in modernization. They’ve been running down the business, running down services and cutting costs and it’s that business plan that postal workers have overwhelmingly rejected today” (Poulter, 2009). Elsewhere, union representatives argued that the Royal Mail’s plans were regressive in nature and would “take the service backward” (Poulter, 2007b). This indicates that the definition of modernization lies in the eye of the beholder, so to speak. Modernization is a fluid and highly subjective term used here for the diminution of organized labor and promotion

of organized capital. What management sees as modern, the union sees as regressive, and vice versa.

The *Daily Mirror* consistently (and unsurprisingly, given its pro-Labour, left-leaning politics) gave more space to the perspective of the unions than either of the two right-wing newspapers. In an editorial discussing the FBU strike the newspaper branded fire chiefs as “hypocritical,” putting forward “draconian” plans (*Daily Mirror*, 2002, November 19), while its industrial correspondent, Paul Manning, highlighted the perils of modernization and the FBU’s opposition to cutting the number of firefighters on duty at night, as “this would lead to more deaths because, although there are fewer fires at night, they tend to be more serious” (Manning, 2002). According to the *Mirror*, modernization would entail a threat to public safety, where the need to run ever more “efficient” services necessarily means cutbacks in staffing and resources. In their coverage of the CWU strike, the *Mirror* continued its support of the striking workers. In particular, it granted column space to an ongoing investigative report into Royal Mail’s plans for their staff’s pension fund:

Royal Mail workers will have their pensions slashed unless they work five years longer under secret plans revealed by the *Mirror* today. The move would cost staff members thousands of pounds a year. Some could see their retirement pay halved. In addition, the posties’ final salary scheme would be closed to new members from next year. Last night, on the eve of two weeks of pay strikes, union leaders vowed to fight the “hammer blow” proposals. Dave Ward, deputy general secretary of the Communication Workers Union, said: “This is a savage attack on pay and conditions. Our members aren't going to roll over and accept this. It will only galvanize support for strike action” (Manning, 2007d).

These plans were quickly dropped, which raised suspicion on the part of the *Mirror* as to whether this “u-turn” was performed because of the newspapers’ investigation or whether it was a genuine change of heart. The paper also foregrounded the perspectives of “shop floor” workers in a manner uncommon to its rivals. For example, a CWU spokesman was quoted describing the Royal Mail’s plans as “a shameful disgrace,” going on to point out the following:

When workers join the business they sign up to a life of hard graft. They must be prepared to get up at ungodly hours in all weathers to get the mail through. They know they will not earn a fortune. But, until now at least, they could look forward to a reasonable retirement at 60. Now management are [sic] threatening to rip up their side of that bargain. This is not simply a kick in the teeth for workers. It is also a betrayal of the duty of care to the public. Bosses cannot hope to provide the efficient service they need to compete with rivals if workers’ morale is rock bottom (quoted in Manning, 2007d)

A harsh critique of modernization came from the *Mirror*’s columnist Paul Routledge:

[Adam] Crozier and his fat cat executives demand “modernization,” which is always shorthand for more work from fewer workers... They’re sacking workers, slashing wages, and driving down conditions of employment because they think they can get away with it. Not since the dark days of Thatcherism has it been so tough to be a trade unionist. Nor so important (Routledge, 2009b).

These excerpts highlight how modernization is essentially an empty signifier, and how what one individual or organization defines as modern is not necessarily what another individual or organization will. What the Royal Mail, the government, the *Daily Mail*, and *The Sun* deem “modern” the *Daily Mirror*, the FBU, and the CWU deem regressive and an attack upon

workers. This highlights the fundamental tension that lies at the heart of a capitalist society where the interests of capital and labor are inherently divergent.

### **Public Service or Profit Motive?**

Several articles discussed the tension between a public service model and a business model concerned solely with the bottom line. Should the fire and postal services be run as public services placing the public interest at a premium or as businesses concerned with providing the most cost-effective service possible? This was the dichotomy presented in tabloid newspaper coverage of the FBU and CWU strikes.

With regard to the Royal Mail, the ethos of public service has meant that postage to anywhere in Britain is the same price and of the same quality wherever in the country the service is used. “Regardless of its problems,” said a *Daily Mirror* editorial, the Royal Mail “is an institution that’s part of the fabric of our society and helps binds the country together” (*Daily Mirror*, 2009, October 16). Such a model would surely not survive under a private system, as a *Daily Mail* opinion columnist indicated:

At some point, there must surely be negotiations in which the fundamental problem confronting the Royal Mail is honestly dealt with. This is that it has a dual role. On the one hand it is a commercial organization which, like all such, must be profitable. On the other it has a social function: to deliver a service of equal quality, at the same price, throughout the United Kingdom. It has to do what a purely commercial delivery service won’t undertake: treating all its customers equally, irrespective of distance, irrespective of the fact that some of its collections and deliveries can't possibly be profitable (Massie, 2009).

To be modern would be to leave behind the public service ethos that has characterized the Royal Mail since its inception. Moving to a private model would mean that the public would lose the guarantee of equality of service and price because, as the columnist noted, this would not be a viable option for a private business that needs to generate profit and must cut costs wherever possible in order to accomplish this. A contrasting perspective was found in a *Daily Mail* editorial:

Gradually, the postal market has been opened up to competition... But instead of cutting costs and improving customer service standards to meet the challenge, the Royal Mail has, like the public sector monolith it remains, increased short-term revenues by cutting services. So 4,600 post offices have closed, one of the two daily deliveries has been abolished, and 15 million letters are still lost every year... Without modernization, the Post Office will continue to decline. The profitable parts of its business will be taken over by foreign rivals, like the successful Deutsche Post, privatized in 2000. The rump postal delivery service on which so many ordinary Britons and small businesses still depend will continue to decline, no doubt requiring an increasing Government subsidy to keep going at all. And the taxpayer will be saddled with the company's £6 billion pension shortfall. We will lose a great British institution, miss out on the opportunity to create a world-beating British company, and leave the British people with a wholly inadequate mail service. Privatization is not always the answer, but if ever there were an example of an institution that would be better off free from political meddling, the Royal Mail is it (*Daily Mail*, 2007, October 5).

In this editorial, the *Daily Mail* situated the Royal Mail's problems with the CWU against a backdrop of changes in European Union competition law that made monopolies unlawful. As a



result of these laws, the Royal Mail was forced to compete with private firms. The *Daily Mail* brings this argument to its only logical conclusion under neoliberalism: Though the Royal Mail was described as being a “great British intuition,” the only option left was for the service to be fully privatized and compete in a capitalist system against its rivals. Throughout, “modernization” was presented as the magical elixir that would solve all of the company’s problems.

Against this necessity, there would no role for trade unions, as the following excerpt from a *Daily Mail* op-ed indicated:

The Communication Workers Union is one of the last bastions of the 20th-century delusion that public services exist for the benefit of those who work in them. Its leaders oppose Royal Mail’s proposed modernization because they claim that it could cost 40,000 jobs. They are oblivious to the reality plain to everybody else: that with a host of rival delivery systems available in the private sector, unless Royal Mail changes, it will die. The CWU’s members will then have no jobs at all. Their leaders will have upheld their principles, but these look as relevant as old suspender belts for women wearing tights. Today, a big strike could happen only in the public sector. Few private sector workers dare. Even in industries such as motor manufacturing, once notorious for bloody-mindedness, employees know that if they don’t do the business, if the profits are not there, companies will shift plants and jobs elsewhere. Only the public service still offers the softest of featherbeds (Hastings, 2007, October 13).

This eloquent paragraph could be summarized in four words: There is no alternative. The union must adapt to the realities of the twenty-first century. Through remonstrations such as this, members of the journalistic community actively constructed reality and policed the boundaries of

possibility. Public service models are presented as antiquated, stuffy, and anachronistic, while unions are impediments to the nirvana of a flexible labor force. The private sector, with its compliant (i.e., non-unionized) workforce has already cottoned on to the need to fall in line; it is the public sector workforce, with its “softest of featherbeds” that now needs to align itself with the exigencies of the modern economy.

Absent from the discussion was the fact that the work practices under scrutiny were actually the result of reforms achieved by unions over many years, designed by those with expertise in the job to maximize public satisfaction and, in the case of the firefighters, public safety. Take, for example, the following commentary on how the working practices of firefighters are a handbrake on necessary modernization:

Ludicrously, the fire service is trapped by a legislative straitjacket which requires firemasters to have a certain number of firefighters on shift at stations at all times and to send out a certain number of appliances to incidents, regardless of how serious they are... And we know that in large industrial estates there are more likely to be fires during the day, when people are at work. We must be more pragmatic. Do we need so many firefighters on duty at night? (Ord, 2002, November 29)

Here, authority to proclaim on matters of public safety rests not with firefighters but with opinion columnists invested in some hidden knowledge that the workers doing the job have yet to discover. This is dangerous because it undermines the integrity of firefighters as credible sources of information on what is and is not in the public interest when it comes to maximizing fire safety. While the role of an opinion columnist is to proclaim their opinion on the issues of the day, excerpts such as this are staggering, as the columnist has no credibility for this kind of proclamation and no authority to be making it. Dismissing the credibility of firefighters makes it

much easier to position their practices as impediments to modernization, leaving the impression of an archaic fire service wedded to practices unsuited to modern times. The pragmatism the author referred to is not the kind of pragmatism rooted in public service but in the hard-headedness of the bottom line, where the most cost-effective manner of operating is the most favorable. Yet if one considers the matter from a public safety perspective, one may reasonably contend that the point of having “so many” firefighters available is that *if* a fire were to occur, the service would be well-positioned to respond with maximal manpower to prevent loss of life and property damage. Another article, quoting a “government source,” offered the same theme:

The way the shift system works, most firemen do two-day shifts followed by two-night shifts and then four days off. But many firemen get two full nights’ sleep on the night shift, which means you might get six days to yourself (Walters, 2002).

While this may very well be true, one can hardly blame the firefighters for a lack of emergencies to attend to; obviously, had there been emergencies, they would not have been able to sleep. The curious position that commentators and their sources find themselves in is to be wishing for more fires to break out so that the public can get their money’s worth.

Again, one gets the impression that these newspapers and their columnists are concerned solely with the bottom line. The public service model, like strong trade unionism, is presented as belonging to another, less efficient era and needs to be discarded. The reader is left with the impression that on the one hand lies modernity and on the other a herd of dinosaurs unwilling to adapt. However, the need to be modern can be easily read as the need to cut costs, and indeed, that is what those preaching the mantra of efficiency were calling for. This is contrasted with the public service model of the postal service and the fire service, which prioritizes equality of

provision and, in the case of the fire service, the maximization of public safety. It is clear that we cannot have it both ways.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed the issue of modernization as it was presented in tabloid newspaper discourse on selected strikes. It has found two sub-themes related to this issue: First, that modernization is a process that is rarely defined but often demanded; and second, that modernization entails a shift away from traditional public service models that have characterized the fire and postal services. Throughout, *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail*, the two right-leaning newspapers, positioned themselves in opposition to the cause of the unions and in favor of modernization, while the *Daily Mirror* took a strong pro-union perspective in its news and editorial content. While modernization was not a term of the tabloids' own design, it was nonetheless accepted uncritically by the newspapers and reported as the key point of contention. The overall result is that the trade unions were painted as unreconstructed dinosaurs with no role in the twenty-first century economy; they are reactionaries from another era. Indeed, their prolonged existence seems to be something of a mystery. The next chapter discusses another prominent theme in tabloid newspaper discourse: the trouble and inconvenience inflicted by trade unions upon the general public.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### TRADE UNION TROUBLE

If modernization was the dominant theme in tabloid newspaper coverage of these strikes, it was closely followed by more traditional tropes of panic, worry, and fright caused by trade unions. There are two sub-themes pertaining to this issue: (1) The calamity caused by strike action; and (2) The tabloid newspapers' strategy of "divide and rule," pitting worker against worker by contrasting one sides' sacrifice with the other sides' avarice. My contention throughout is that the often breathless rhetoric highlights the fact that trade unionism remains a force to be taken seriously and a threat to the workings of neoliberalism.

#### **Panic!**

Tabloid newspaper coverage of the FBU strike stressed the harm that the strike would cause to the British public. A *Daily Mail* editorial, for example, warned the "Fire Strike Will Lead to Tragedy" in its headline, before arguing that the FBU strike would directly imperil the lives of innocents:

One thing is certain... Sooner or later, in a burning house or the wreckage of a road accident, somebody will die waiting for the rescue that never comes... That inevitable consequence should rest heavily on the conscience of those engaged in this dispute. It should concentrate minds too. Firefighters enjoy enormous respect – rightly so – for their willingness to lay their lives on the line. But what happens when the first avoidable tragedies are reported? (*Daily Mail*, 2002, November 14).

Here, readers are told that the management of the fire services can rest easy, for it is only the firefighters whose consciences will be afflicted should anybody die during the strike, as they are the ones solely to blame. Unfortunately, people did die in fires during the period that the FBU was on strike. *The Sun*'s report of the initial tragedies referred to a woman dying "just over an hour after firemen walked out on strike" (Whittingham, 2002), while the *Daily Mail*'s pointed out that "two pensioners died last night as the fire service walkout got under way" (Sherry & Orr, 2002). The phrasing implicates the firefighters in the death of the victims, for they are the ones who "walked out." That loss of life is the FBU's fault is made clear in a provocative *Daily Mail* headline that asked "Could These Lives Have Been Saved?" (Hale, Tozer, & Wilkes, 2002). The question is rhetorical inasmuch as the questioner already presumes to know the answer; guilt has already been ascribed to the firefighters and the purpose of the question is to reinforce this guilt. Had the firefighters not been on strike, the logic follows, then these lives would not have been lost. It should be noted that the same article quoted an FBU representative as being "very, very sorry" about the deaths:

If we had been working as normal we would have been at the call within two minutes. I deeply regret this but if people want to say it is our fault then that is unfair. If anyone is to blame it is the government (Hale et al, 2002).

The article also quoted the sister-in-law of the deceased, who says the death of her brother-in-law "is a real tragedy, but I don't blame anybody for it. These firefighters deserve every penny they get and I back them all the way" (Hale et al, 2002). However, supportive perspectives such as this were a relative rarity in the *Daily Mail* and conspicuous by their absence in *The Sun*. *The Sun* was much more blatant in casting blame, as typified by one editorial which referred to the "death and chaos" caused by the strike (*The Sun*, 2002, November 16). Overall, *The Sun* took a

brasher stance in its condemnation of the striking firefighters, with combative rhetoric woven into its news reports and commentaries.

Throughout, there was a sense of panic that the strike was imperiling the safety of the British people. In the pages of *The Sun*, Labour's John Reid, the then-Home Secretary, is quoted saying: "Is this playing into the terrorists' hands? This is a perfectly legitimate question to ask the fire union" (*The Sun*, 2002, November 13). It is unlikely that Reid was coyly posing the gambit of a terrorist attack; much more likely is the fact that he was making clear Labour's opposition to the strike by noting its potential ill-intended consequences. Reid's question was used against the FBU, with *The Sun* claiming the union "will hand terrorists a golden opportunity" (*The Sun*, 2002, November 13). This kind of fevered, oppositional rhetoric permeated the discourse, whether it was in reference to "hundreds of [police] officers [being] pulled away from crime-fighting duties to cover for strikers at a time of high terror alert" (*The Sun*, 2003, March 17), "inflation-busting pay deals in the public sector" (Clarke & Behar, 2002), or "thousands of workers [being] thrown on the dole, inflation [going] through the roof, and the cost of home loans... soar[ing]" (*The Sun*, 2002, November 18). Headlines like "Britain Can't Afford to Let Firemen Win" (*The Sun*, 2002, November 18) summarized the state of emergency that Britain apparently found itself in. A *Daily Mail* report provided speculation and conjecture about what "could" happen as a result of industrial action:

Chaos caused to daily lives by today's firefighters' strike could include: More people dying in road accidents because Green Goddesses don't carry specialized cutting equipment used to free trapped victims; Houses and businesses left to burn down as the Army focuses on saving life, not property; Rail workers refusing to work on the undergrounds in London, Liverpool, and Newcastle; Nineteen London Tube stations

forced to close on safety grounds because they have lifts, not escalators; Petrol supplies hit if fuel tanker drivers stop work on safety grounds; The Channel Tunnel and sea ports closed; High-rise buildings emptied; Football matches and pop concerts cancelled; Theatres, cinemas and restaurants closed; Nuclear power stations, chemical plants and factories vulnerable to safety walkouts; Mass confusion in the event of a major disaster or terrorist attack; Law and order under threat (Eastham, 2002b).

The list – from the news section of the newspaper – begins with the specific and ends with the abstract, and at no point provides evidence for its assertions. Rather, readers are left with an apocalyptic vision of a world run asunder by organized labor, the implication being that the FBU must be stopped if order is to be restored. Such meaningless, trivial speculation as this does not advance the public interest or clarify the complexity of industrial relations. It is therefore unhelpful to readers seeking to understand this strike and its attendant issues.

*The Sun* in particular stressed the urgent necessity of defeating the strike. One op-ed from its pages began by stating, “the strikes by the Fire Brigades Union must be soundly defeated” (Stephens, 2002). Referring to the potential of subsequent strikes by other workers, one report speculated on the potential of strike action by airport staff, rail conductors, teachers, postal workers, and paramedics, emboldened by the firefighters’ action, with a headline that asked “Who Will Be Next to Walk Out on Strike?” (*The Sun*, 2002, November 13). Perhaps recognizing the reawakening of the trade union movement, *The Sun* dramatized the conflict as a way of insisting the moral imperative that the strike is brought to a swift conclusion:

The stakes could not be higher. There is no way the Government can let itself be strong-armed into agreeing a massive rise the country cannot afford... This is the most crucial



industrial dispute in 20 years. Union power and restrictive practices MUST be faced down (*The Sun*, 2002, November 22).

Here, the strike takes on totemic importance because it indicates the need to *keep* the labor movement weak so that neoliberal hegemony can be maintained.

Andy Gilchrist, general secretary of the FBU, was prominently featured in tabloid newspaper coverage of the strike. This is perhaps quite natural, as he is the elected representative of the union and would inevitably feature in such coverage. However, what is noteworthy is the personalized nature of the commentary and investigations into Gilchrist's private life and the fact that Gilchrist moves into the media spotlight at the expense of the perspectives of rank-and-file union members. Gilchrist is singled out for criticism in a number of reports, columns, and editorials, described by the *News of the World* as "glory-seeking," "self-promoting," and a "posturing baron" (*News of the World*, 2002, December 1). For *The People*, he was a "left-wing firebrand" and one of the "villains" of the dispute" (*The People*, 2002, December 1), while a *Sun* headline described him as the "Wrecker in Chief" (*The Sun*, 2002, November 14). The coverage of the dispute became increasingly personal, with Gilchrist singled out for criticism for his approach and methods. For one columnist, Gilchrist is "the strike's author" (Stephens, 2002), a turn of phrases that conveniently ignores the fact that a strike cannot be "authored" by one union official, however powerful, and must be ratified by democratic vote of members (perhaps ironically, this was one of the Thatcher reforms). The article goes on: "Mr. Gilchrist will get his just reward when honest firefighters realize he has led them into a fight they do not deserve to win" (Stephens, 2002). The *News of the World* describes the firefighters as "misled," claiming that "power-crazed Gilchrist is leading the crews down the road to humiliation" (*News of the World*, 2002, December 1). For the *Mail on Sunday*'s Peter Hitchens:

When will the firemen realize that they are being used? Their leaders want a strike because it suits their Far Left politics... The poor firemen hate being on strike because they are good people who went into the job to help others. They should go back to work, shaming their leaders into shutting up and the Government into coming up with a long-term, no-strike deal that makes sure this idiotic mess never happens again (Hitchens, 2002).

Throughout, the agency of the union members was minimized; they are little more than lemmings mindlessly following Gilchrist over the cliff to their destruction. The fact that they have not only consented to strike action by voting for it but may possibly have pushed Gilchrist toward a more aggressive stance to mirror their dissatisfaction is absent from the narrative.

Singling out Gilchrist made it easier to apportion blame for the strike's consequences. *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail* did not equivocate over where blame should be placed. Under a headline bellowing "How Many More Have to Die?" one article stated "union chief Andy Gilchrist was under pressure to back down last night after the fire strike left a man dead" (Parker, 2002). Blame for the death is clearly traceable to Gilchrist, a theme the article developed further: "Up to last night three people had died since the strike began... But FBU bosses were yesterday refusing to budge on their massive 40 per cent pay demand" (Parker, 2002). The strike is depicted as the sole doing of Gilchrist, as are its consequences: "There is more at stake than one trade unionist's arrogant disregard for people's lives" (Stephens, 2002). Not only had Gilchrist recklessly endangered the lives of innocents in "authoring" the strike, he had done so callously, not caring about its impact on the public. Many articles positioned the strike as a battle of wills between Gilchrist and Tony Blair. One such editorial from *The Sun* is an exemplar of this kind of discourse:

The irresponsibility of Fire Brigades Union chief Andy Gilchrist astonishes us. Gilchrist is a political activist; a classic Marxist-Leninist... He has marched his men up to the top of the hill – knowing he must march them back down... Gilchrist simply cannot be allowed to succeed. That's why we ask if Blair should fight with more aggression...

Gilchrist is trying to intimidate the British government – and the taxpayer. In doing so he has seized government property to which he has no right. If he goes ahead with his eight-day strike plan, Blair must seize this equipment back. Gilchrist is putting lives at risk.

People have ALREADY died. How much more damage can this man be allowed to cause? (*The Sun*, 2002, November 15)

By singling out Gilchrist, depicting his views as radical, and using personalization to draw the reader-as-taxpayer into the debate, *The Sun* painted an impression of a man with reckless disregard for the harm he could cause.

As the strike went on, the right-wing newspapers devoted more column inches to coverage of Gilchrist's private life, including allegations that he was using union money to fund his social calendar. Under the headline "Who was the Blonde in Back of Andy Gilchrist's £100 Taxi?", journalists for the *Mail on Sunday* offered the following report:

Andy Gilchrist may have the use of a Saab convertible as part of his £82,000 a year Fire Brigades Union package, but he still spent nearly £100 of union funds on a taxi home after a night out with a glamorous woman. The *Mail on Sunday* has obtained proof of a £98.62 taxi ride - the equivalent of 14 hours' work for the average firefighter - part of which married, 41-year-old Gilchrist shared with an attractive blonde. The fare, for a 17-mile journey from an Italian restaurant, was billed to the union (Leake, Henderson, & Perthen, 2002).

Note that when it suited the newspaper to do so, it drew reference to the poor salary drawn by firefighters, here invoked as a means of illustrating Gilchrist's *largesse*. This places distance between Gilchrist and his members, asking them to cast envious eyes in Gilchrist's direction. *The Sun* also developed the story of Gilchrist's private life, resulting in the following exposé:

Furious Tracey Holland told last night how firefighters' strike leader Andy Gilchrist bedded her during all-expenses-paid union get-togethers. The 31-year-old brunette said she fell for his charms at a Fire Brigades Union "fairness at work" conference. And their torrid affair continued for 12 months as they met up at other events – all financed by union funds. Tracey said they enjoyed marathon sex sessions at a string of hotels around the country. On one occasion they even made love SIX times in one night. But the ex-firegirl accused dad-of-two Gilchrist, 42, of being a liar and a cheat because he told her he was NOT married, did NOT want children and NEVER planned to tie the knot. Her shock revelation comes in the run-up to the next nationwide 24-hour walkout by the FBU, due tomorrow. And it will stun Gilchrist's loyal wife Loretta and their two young children (Guy, 2003).

While one could reasonably argue that the ethics of a union leader using his members' money to wine and dine a significant other is a matter of legitimate public interest, the personalized nature of the investigation is troublesome given that Gilchrist did not invite this attention into his private life and was only part of the news agenda as a result of the strike he was leading. Thus, while the report may indeed be newsworthy – a subjective standard based on news values, in any case (Gans, 1979) – it is hard to see this as anything other than ammunition against a reinvigorated union. Gilchrist's family, who certainly did not invite such intrusion and speculation, suffered as a result of the threat the FBU pose to the neoliberal consensus.

Unlike *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Mirror* consistently backed Gilchrist, described as “the target of vicious abuse from the press” (*Daily Mirror*, 2002, November 19). The *Mirror* quoted people claiming to have been saved from fires by Gilchrist, such as one who commented on how “well-qualified he is to lead the workers in their demand for more pay. He knows more than anyone what a dangerous job it can be” (*Daily Mirror*, 2002, November 19). Gilchrist was treated by the paper as an authority rather than a pariah. The *Mirror* concluded:

To many he is seen as a hard-nosed union man who has split the country over the demands for his members. But, like all firefighters, he is driven by a desire to help others. It was the reason he joined up in 1979 (*Daily Mirror*, 2002, November 19).

Another report from the paper illustrated the strength of support for the strike among FBU members and gave greater prominence to the perspectives of its rank-and-file members:

John Noak, 41, of Lanark fire station said: “Andy has been portrayed as a monster out to wreck the Government when all he is doing it trying to get hard-working people a livable wage.”... Colleague Paul Gormley, 41, based at Glasgow's Parkhead station, added: “The strike has 100 per cent support among the brothers and sisters of the FBU. The amazing reception to the here today illustrates the strength of feeling among the members” (*Daily Mirror*, 2002, November 15).

Another article, under the headline “Support our Fire Crews,” quoted a firefighter as saying “Andy Gilchrist is a decent working man who enjoys the support of every firefighter in the country” (Tait, 2002). The *Daily Mirror* provided an impression of a union membership that was far from passive but actively supportive of Gilchrist.

While the stakes were much lower for the CWU strikes, the same exaggerated, combative rhetoric was deployed in the pages of tabloid newspapers. This included headlines like “Post

Workers Threaten More Crippling Strikes” (Derbyshire, 2007, June 30), “Another Week of Chaos in the Post” (*Daily Mail*, 2007, October 9), and “Post Hell Deepens” (*Daily Mirror*, 2007, October 12). One *Mail on Sunday* article possessed the following lede: “Hundreds of militant workers carried on striking yesterday despite a peace deal signed by union leaders and Royal Mail bosses to end walkouts that have brought chaos to the post system” (*Mail on Sunday*, 2007, October 14). Here, that the workers are “militant” is presented as material fact rather than a subjective contention by the newspaper (it should also be noted that “chaos,” which closes the lede, is also a subjective term). The Winter of Discontent received its obligatory mention in modified form with a *Daily Mail* headline stating “Post Strike May Signal Autumn of Discontent” (*Daily Mail*, 2007, September 12). The breathless, panicked rhetoric found in headlines was mirrored in reports, commentaries, and editorials, such as references to “widespread chaos [and] severe disruption... [that would leave] tens of thousands of businesses and householders without their post” (Culley, 2007), the CWU and the “militants” within it (*The Sun*, 2007, October 11) seeking to “cripple post deliveries across the country” (Doughty, 2007), and cause “maximum disruption to mail services” (Robertson, 2007). According to the *Daily Mail*, “critics claimed [the strike] amounted to a return to the industrial strife of the 1970s” (*Daily Mail*, 2007, June 8), though these critics go unnamed and the claims made go unsupported. Overall, the tone of the reports and commentary had an apocalyptic flavor disproportionate to the situation that arguably does little to advance public understanding of complex issues like industrial relations. This is not to say that the public have no right to be angry when their mail does not come; simply to point out that the news media’s role is not to fan these flames of anger but instead provide the public with knowledge of the issues at stake.

Newspapers detailed the breadth of people and organizations “left without important mail deliveries” (*News of the World*, 2007, October 14). These included high school students awaiting their exam results who “feared sorting office strikes could scupper [their] deliveries” (*News of the World*, 2007, August 5), the unemployed who “might miss out on their benefits checks” (Dyson, 2007), and online shopping businesses who dealt a “hammer blow” by the strike (Poulter, 2007b). The *Daily Mail* detailed the “100 million items being held up, including hospital appointments, credit card payments, small business orders, and checks” (*Daily Mail*, 2007, October 12), seemingly going out of its way to select the most emotive and important mail affected, while another report ominously warned that “the Christmas post will come under threat” unless the strike was called off (Poulter, 2007b). A *Daily Mail* news report went into greater detail about the effect of the strike:

Bills and payments linked to credit cards and utility bills have been held up, risking penalty charges. Thousands of people have missed hospital appointments or failed to get tickets for holidays and concerts. The families of soldiers serving in Iraq have found it impossible to get letters and parcels to their loved ones, while others have been left without passports and unable to travel. House sales and divorces have been delayed because documents are sitting in a sorting office somewhere (Poulter, 2007c).

However, not all of the strike’s effects are quite so weighty:

Harry Potter has overcome many a challenge in the books and films charting his adventures. Now it is hoped the schoolboy wizard can work his magic on an industrial dispute. Royal Mail chiefs are using Harry in negotiations with postal union leaders to appeal to them not to disrupt deliveries of J. K. Rowling's latest novel. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, the seventh and last in the series, is due to be published on July 20

and Royal Mail has promised next-day delivery to thousands of retailers across the country. But with postal workers threatening a series of walkouts in a dispute over pay, bosses have asked the Communication Workers Union to ensure that millions of children are not disappointed (McGhie, 2007).

Overall, the impression is left of a strike that will have disastrous effects to almost every member of society, from small businesses facing collapse to small children facing literary disappointment – no stone seems to be unturned in the reportage of the strike’s consequences.

Small businesses were consistently mentioned as suffering as a result of the strike. For the *Daily Mail*, they were “caught in the crossfire” of this conflict (*Daily Mail*, 2007, July 26), while another report warned that the strike “could cripple smaller firms” (Atkinson, 2007). A representative of the Federation of Small Businesses commented on the effect of the strike on his members: “A check delayed in the post can mean the difference between life and death for a small business, which means that this strike cannot be allowed to go ahead” (*Daily Mail*, 2007, June 8). This quote places the needs of one sector of society over another, where small business owners have needs that take precedence over those of mail workers. One report provided a barrage of criticism of the CWU for its decision to go on strike:

Small businesses could be forced to the wall by the postal strikes, bosses warned last night. Others fear having to make swinging job cuts. The warnings came as more mail workers joined wildcat stoppages after two official 48-hour strikes – with more threatened. Nick Dines, of the British Chambers of Commerce, said: “We are very concerned. Although the postal market is open to competition, most operators still rely on Royal Mail... So no matter who you use, you don't get any post if Royal Mail are on strike.” John Raine, of Stair Rods UK, said: “Most of our customers pay by check and we



had only two this week. We aren't being paid so can't pay suppliers." Paul Farquhar, of online retailer Healthy and Essential, said his firm was being "seriously damaged" (King, 2007b).

Quoting these figures in quick succession provides an atmosphere of fright that the strike could put small firms out of business or, at the very least, force them into releasing staff. Another article quotes a Federation of Small Businesses spokesman, who argues "the livelihoods and jobs of many people in small businesses will be put at risk if this dispute continues for much longer" (Derbyshire, 2007).

The Lindsey Oil Refinery strike was not without its panicked references, even if, as I shall illustrate in Chapter Nine, the focus of media coverage took a somewhat different turn. At the outbreak of the strikes, *The Sun* reported on events as follows:

Wildcat strikes exploded across Britain yesterday – sparking bitter memories of the mass walkouts which crippled the country during the 1970s. Legions of cops were called in to guard chanting, placard-waving strikers as fury spread nationwide over the employment of foreign contractors to build a giant UK oil plant (Parker, Pascoe-Watson, & Lewis, 2009).

Note the dramatic and forceful language: The strikes "exploded," the memories are "bitter," the country was "crippled" in the 1970s, "legions of cops" needed to be called in, and "fury" was spreading nationwide. The paragraph's denouement, the "employment of foreign contractors" almost seems anti-climactic given the frenetic build-up, as though the workers were causing trouble over something seemingly inconsequential. The *Daily Mail* also drew on old tropes in their initial coverage:

Angry workers are plotting a week of coordinated wildcat action which could throw key services into chaos. Unions insisted yesterday that they have no control over workers who are using websites and text messages to organize the illegal strikes. The action could threaten energy and fuel supplies during the coldest winter for more than a decade, with snow already causing havoc last night (Barrow, Sims, & Brogan, 2009).

The threat posed by these workers is real and dangerous, compounded by the fact that they are not under the authority of a union, which could at least “control” them (as though the workers have no agency of their own). The article goes on:

A website named The Bear Facts, specifically set up to co-ordinate action, has promised the industrial dispute will intensify in the coming days. One message used class war rhetoric to declare: “The Employer shakes with fear as the sleeping Giant begins to wake. The fight is on, Brothers! The fight is on!” (Barrow, Sims, & Brogan, 2009).

This quote is indicative of a strategy of extrapolating from one anecdote to the whole. Linking the future intensity of the strikes to the web posting is somewhat far-fetched and only serves to create unnecessary drama and tension. As I will illustrate in Chapter Nine, however, events at Lindsey Oil Refinery see coverage go in a very different direction, and the emphasis on the harm caused by trade unions quickly subsides in favor of something deemed more newsworthy.

### **Divide and Rule**

The coverage of the FBU strike in particular was noteworthy because of the manner in which it used oppositional, combative rhetoric to cause friction among workers in different sectors of the economy, sewing seeds of division instead of allowing them to find common cause. This hailed from statements by Tony Blair and Labour Party spokespersons. *The Sun*, for

example, quoted Tony Blair saying that the government cannot agree to the terms of the union as this would create a “me too” culture, which the newspaper argued would result in “other greedy unions demanding huge pay rises” (*The Sun*, 2002, November 18). The way *The Sun* phrased this sentence suggests that the union would hoard money for itself, obscuring the fact that the union’s “demands” are for higher wages for workers of the same social class as *The Sun*’s readership. There is a deep rhetorical difference between the statements “greedy *unions* demanding huge pay rises” and “greedy *workers* demanding huge pay rises.” The first statement deflects attention away from the workers themselves and suggests that it is the union that is being greedy. For readers of the newspaper who are “workers” but are not unionized, *The Sun* provides a framework that allows the reader to cast blame upon the union for its greed. A *Sun* headline reinforced the greediness of trade unionists by declaring straightforwardly, “You Get Enough Already” (*The Sun*, 2002, December 17), although of course “enough” is a subjective measure.

Other articles explicitly drew lines pitting firefighters against other workers. For example, one columnist wrote: “The union now says it will take a mere 16 per cent as a first year downpayment. Tell that to nurses and teachers” (Stephens, 2002). The matter of how poorly paid nurses and teachers are goes unquestioned as tabloid newspapers attack the gumption of the firefighters. Instead of taking a holistic view of the economy that looks at how different workers are poorly paid even in times of relative economic growth, the right-leaning tabloids often took a more atavistic approach, suggesting that because workers are poorly paid in one sector they should be poorly paid across the board. In other words, the prerogative is not to determine ways of raising conditions uniformly but to level conditions down to the lowest common denominator. A “race to the bottom” narrative quickly developed:

Tony Blair will end massive pay demands for good if he crushes the firefighters, union bosses admitted last night. Defeat for the Fire Brigades Union will put a lid on wage rises for teachers, council and rail workers, and nurses. Union leaders are desperate to back the FBU to keep the door open (Cecil, 2002).

That “a lid” needs to be placed on “wage rises for teachers, council and rail workers, and nurses” is presented as a necessity. A Sun headline warned, “It’s a Class War” (Kavanagh, 2002b), as the prospect of strikes by several unions loomed large, or at least was depicted to loom large.

A strategy of divide and rule was also used to separate the FBU’s Andy Gilchrist from the rank-and-file membership of his union, by calling into question his salary and benefits package. A *Daily Mail* report, for example, described Gilchrist’s lifestyle as “the epitome of the suburban Englishman. The four-bedroom house in suburban Surrey with a brand new Saab convertible in the driveway could belong to a budding City executive” (Leake, 2002a). The same article quoted “government insider” who said:

Most of Gilchrist’s members have no idea that he is coining it in. It’s one thing to have these deals approved by delegates at an FBU conference, but union members and the public have the right to know how much this bunch of politically motivated militants are being paid (quoted in Leake, 2002a).

The distinction between the rank-and-file and Gilchrist is stark; the sketch drawn is that his lifestyle is not something enjoyed by his members, better paralleling that of a “budding City executive” than a working class firefighter. The quote from the government insider suggests that if rank-and-file FBU members were to know of Gilchrist’s ostentatious lifestyle then surely they would not be backing strike action. This theme was developed elsewhere:

The union baron leading the firemen's strike enjoys pay and perks worth nearly four times the wages of his striking members... [as well as] a new Saab 9-3 convertible plus petrol, a cut-price mortgage and a massive pension contribution... Mr. Gilchrist's home is also far removed from the properties most firemen could expect to afford (Clarke & Behar, 2002).

Whatever one makes of Gilchrist's pay, he is a democratically elected leader of a union – not a “baron” – whose salary and conditions are determined through democratic vote. That this goes unmentioned diminishes the credibility of Gilchrist's position. Nowhere in the pages of the *Daily Mail* or *The Sun* were actual firefighters sought out for their reaction to Gilchrist's wage. Instead, surrogates for working class opinion are used, like a taxi cab driver who exclaimed “it's not right that firefighters are on strike while he enjoys a luxury lifestyle, running up huge cab fares” (Leake, Henderson, & Perthen, 2002). The taxi cab driver functions as the voice of working class in this narrative, lending credibility to the position of the right-leaning newspapers and creating distance between Gilchrist and his members. Tabloid readers, whose pay and conditions are more likely to be closer to the FBU's ran-and-file membership than to Gilchrist's, are invited to see Gilchrist as a charlatan interested only in lining his own pockets.

A historical perspective is provided by the *Mail on Sunday*, which features an op-ed by Joe Haines, press secretary to former Labour leader and Prime Minister Harold Wilson. Haines insisted that Blair “has no option but to crush [the striking firefighters]” (Haines, 2002). Haines noted the resurgence in trade union militancy and argued Blair must take action to stop it in its tracks:

If that means decent men and women - firefighters, nurses, engine drivers, teachers, postal workers and the like - all conned by their cynical and hypocritical leadership, are crushed as well, that is a sad but necessary requirement (Haines, 2002).

The rank-and-file membership – the “decent men and women” – are stupid and naïve pawns in a vicious game played by trade union leaders. That they may actually desire strike action or feel it is the only option left to them to advance their interests is absent from the narrative. Haines reminds the *Mail on Sunday*'s readers of the horrors of the past, when the trade union movement was significantly stronger:

Day after day we were faced with monstrous pay claims. Foolishly, we offered to settle with the rail workers for a 29 per cent rise. They rejected it. They wanted more and they got it. The civil servants got 33 per cent. Everyone piled in... Rampant inflation was as certain as tomorrow. The risks we faced then are the same now (Haines, 2002).

The parallel is clear: The unions' “monstrous” pay claims were excessive in the past and they are excessive now; the unions were defeated in the past and they must be defeated now. Haines is used to provide historical context and to juxtapose the rise in trade union activity with the “monstrous” 1970s. His is one of several articles that drew specific reference to the 1970s and the Winter of Discontent, which remains a major frame through which contemporary industrial disputes are understood, as the following example from the CWU strike of 2009 illustrates, under the headline, “Fresh ‘Winter of Discontent’ Looming”:

Fears of a new “winter of discontent” have been raised as a mounting series of industrial disputes threaten to boil over into strike action. A dramatic deterioration in relations between workers and management across several industries means the nation could soon

face crippling stoppages not seen since the days of the last Labour Government (Fleming, 2009).

The agitated rhetoric suggests that trade union activity is something that must be crushed, even when it comes from a movement that is in a historically weak position.

As the strike developed, tabloid newspapers drew specific reference to the striking firefighters and their position of relative privilege compared to other workers, pitting worker against worker: “Two-thirds salary after 30 years - nurses would love a bit of that. And nurses can’t sleep on night duty, yet save as many, if not more, lives” (Stott, 2002). Political economy is reduced to the level of playground tit-for-tat, with macho posturing about who saves the more lives. Nowhere was this division more explicit than in comparisons drawn between striking firefighters and their temporary military replacements. One article used pathos to draw reader sympathy, making reference to the

thousands of soldiers, sailors, and airmen [who] had their leave cancelled over Christmas and the New Year so they can stay on strike duty... One young Welsh Guardsman who was hoping to get home to see his wife and new baby said he was so fed up that he would be quitting (Leake, 2002b).

There is an almost visceral sense of heartstrings being tugged: soldiers who have their leave abbreviated as a result of strike action are told that it is the firefighters who are at fault; readers who learn of soldiers being unable to see their partners and children are told that the striking firefighters are to blame for this sad affair. *The Sun* pushed these dividing lines even further:

Why on earth is this country using 19,000 highly-trained troops to do the jobs of striking firemen? The average squaddie earns significantly less than the average firefighter. How many soldiers have second jobs? None. It is illegal. They cannot hope to get shift patterns

like the firefighters. Soldiers are banned from joining a union – in fact if they disobey orders they can be locked up. Yes, serving in the fire service IS dangerous. But contrast that with the dangers faced by soldiers (*The Sun*, 2002, November 21).

*The Sun*'s hierarchy of worthiness draws a false dichotomy. In admitting that while what firefighters do for a living is dangerous but then quickly pointing out that because the job of a serviceman is even more dangerous, the potential for audience sympathy for both parties is negated, directed instead solely toward those replacing the striking firefighters and not the firefighters themselves. Note also that “joining a union” is paired with “disobey[ing] orders,” suggesting that the role of a firefighter – indeed, the role of a worker – is to shut up and do as they are told, regardless of how poorly they are paid or how bad their conditions of employment are. The following month, *The Sun*'s editorial line did not let the matter disappear from public view, even when a negotiated settlement seemed to be in sight:

Polls have shown a wave of sympathy for soldiers, sailors and airmen on lower pay who have surrendered leave to stand in for the strikers. They include war heroes who have not seen their families since returning from service in the Balkans or Afghanistan (*The Sun*, 2002, December 3).

This race for public sympathy can only have one victor. But why are the military so poorly paid? This question is not answered because it is not asked. Instead, the impression is cast that if workers are poorly paid in one area of the economy, the correct response is to level incomes down to ensure that all workers are poorly paid, a true equality of misery.

As 2002 turned to 2003 and British military involvement in Iraq came to dominate the news agenda, questions were raised about the prospect of troop deployment being impeded by ongoing FBU strikes. An editorial in *The People* summarized these concerns:



Britain is now facing her darkest hour for many years as war looms against Iraq. We still hope Tony Blair will see sense and not send our boys into action without United Nations approval. But whichever side of this argument you are on, all of us will be on the side of our 45,000 soldiers, sailors and airmen who may be asked to risk their lives. All of us, it seems, except the fat-headed leaders of the Fire Brigades Union. After stupidly snubbing the 16 per cent pay rise they said they wanted, they are now planning an all-out strike at a time when British troops could well be in the heat of battle. This shower are [sic] meant to put fires out. Not pour petrol on the flames of a national crisis. They know the army is so overstretched in the Gulf it will be difficult to find the 19,000 troops needed to provide emergency cover at home. That means lives will be put at unnecessary risk. And the respect and esteem firefighters are held in by the public will melt away if they take this short-sighted, provocative and dangerous action. The FBU leadership is not acting in the interests of the firefighters but their own. They scuppered a decent, face-saving deal because it would have reduced their power. Which just goes to prove firefighters are lions led by donkeys they do not deserve. It is not too late for the FBU to avoid a strike - just as it is not too late for Tony Blair to avoid war with Iraq. But if FBU leaders remain hell-bent on this self-destructive strike action then our brave firefighters must be braver still.

And boot them out of office (*The People*, 2003, March 9).

The onus, once again, is for the firefighters to take hold of their union and remove its leadership, reinforcing the impression that union members are passive dupes led astray by manipulative and greedy union leaders.

Though the above rhetoric is chiefly predominant in tabloid newspaper coverage of the FBU strike, it does make an appearance in some commentary on the CWU strike also. The issue

at stake here is the notion of fairness and whether or not the postal workers are getting a fair deal. A *Daily Mail* columnist took issue with the demands of the union and went on the attack against the public sector:

We need to ignore the blizzard of union propaganda about poor pay and working conditions. Numbers show that in modern Britain, the way to achieve a fat pay packet, as well as job security, is by attaching oneself to the bulging udder of the state... After generations in which public servants were poor relations, today they have caught up with a vengeance. State sector workers get an average of four or five days more holiday a year than their private sector counterparts and... are only half as likely to face the sack. Most are guaranteed early retirement... In a generation, Britain will be a nation divided between privileged state retirees, with their gold-plated deal, and the private sector most of whose employees have lost their defined benefits pension schemes funding it (Hastings, 2007).

Battle lines are drawn here between the public and private sector, with workers in one sector of industry struggling to make sacrifices to pay for the avarice of workers in another. The use of terms like “bulging udder” and “gold-plated” reinforce a narrative of public sector greed. As with the FBU, the possibility of raising standards upward in the private sector to meet those in the public sector is a non-starter. Unmentioned here is the relative strength of trade unions in the public sector as compared to the private sector; according to government figures from 2007 (the time of the strike discussed in the op-ed), 59% of public sector workers were unionized, as compared with 16.1% in the private sector (Department for Business, Innovation, and Skills, n.d.). Therefore, it is a reasonable assumption that the reason why there is disparity between public and private sectors in terms of wages and conditions is because public sector unions are

stronger than their private sector counterparts, with greater numbers behind them to push for worker demands. However, this fact is absent in the discourse, as op-eds like the above push for equality of misery. This feeds into neoliberal ideology by providing a justification for the driving down of wages, rather than providing a framework for a discussion on what workers in certain sectors are so poorly paid and what can be done about it.

The public image of the strikers was also a prominent issue. This was particularly true of the striking firefighters. Journalists, commentators, and editors expounded frequently on the image of firefighters as hardworking and selfless. Depending on the political outlook of the newspaper and its stance on the strike, this was either a truth that needed to be defended or a myth that needed to be dispelled. For example, the view of firefighters as brave public servants was challenged by one *Sun* columnist, who asked: “What about the glamour of fire engines thundering along the high street, the heroic self-image of firefighters in their September 11 T-shirts? Well, the truth is, the spell has been broken” (Stephens, 2002). Their “wildly over-the-top” (*Daily Mail*, 2002, November 14) and “whopping” (*The Sun*, 2002, November 14) pay claims have revealed their greed and broken the spell of heroism they have craftily constructed. They are “on a good whack BEFORE any pay rise... That’s without even mentioning pensions, hols, and jobs for life” (*The Sun*, 2002, December 17).

Several articles drew reference to second and third jobs being taken by firefighters. For one commentator, the situation was so farcical that it could not be said that firefighters were moonlighting in other jobs but that “decorators and mini-cab drivers are moonlighting as firefighters” (Stephens, 2002). A commentator for *The Sun* alleged that officers “treat firefighting as a part-time job” (Kavanagh, 2002a), while a *Daily Mail* report quoted Fire Services Minister Nick Raynsford, who joked, “between now and Christmas is a great time to get

your house decorated,” an apparent reference to the additional time firefighters would have as a result of being on strike and being able to work their second or third job (Walters, 2002). In this article, space was afforded to the FBU for a response, with an FBU official explaining

To make fun of our members for trying to raise enough money to buy their children Christmas presents and put a turkey on the table is sick... The reason some have second jobs is because they cannot survive on a fireman’s pay, let alone when they have been forced to take strike action and have even less cash (Walters, 2002).

However, the merits of this explanation are quickly disposed of, as the article devotes the rest of its space to the second job practice:

Estimates of the number of firefighters who have second jobs range from 40 per cent to 80 per cent. They are supposed to tell fire chiefs if they do other work, but many don’t bother. Some earn more money from their second jobs and run building businesses and driving schools registered in the names of other family members. The most popular second jobs include painting and decorating, undertaking – where firemen’s expertise in handling dead bodies is in demand – and lorry driving (fire engine drivers have advanced HGV training). One fire brigade insider said he knew of a fireman with five second jobs: an undertaker’s assistant, a window cleaner, two gardening jobs and a taxi driver (Walters, 2002).

The article concluded by highlighting the “moonlighting” of a firefighter able to “afford a cozy two-bedroom flat in North London, two secondhand cars and foreign holidays” as a result of the combined income he received from working as a firefighter and carpenter. “Last year,” the article stated, the firefighter and his wife “jetted off to Portugal for two weeks with their two children” (Walters, 2002). The article shifts from the macabre – commenting on “firemen’s

expertise in handling dead bodies” – to the vindictive, attacking a firefighter for needing additional income to provide luxuries for his family.

The issue of second jobs was treated as evidence that the firefighters were attempting to maximize their reward. If on the one hand firefighters are going on strike for higher pay and on the other, some firefighters are, apparently, taking on second, third, fourth, and fifth jobs, one could argue that it would be reasonable to conclude that firefighters are not being paid enough. However, this connection was not made, and instead readers were presented with the somewhat baffling argument that firefighters were taking multiple jobs on a whim. While the *Mail* did afford space to the FBU’s perspective, this was quickly countered and neutralized by a combination of misleading interpretation and anecdotal evidence to paint an impression of a workforce driven solely by greed.

The firefighters’ work ethic was also considered fair game for criticism in the pages of *The Sun*. “By any standard,” the newspaper mused in an editorial, “firemen are not as badly rewarded as they like to claim” (*The Sun*, 2002, November 13). The same editorial went on to discuss the typical career of a firefighter:

A new recruit, aged 18, starts on £16,000 a year and can make £21,531 after five years. They are entitled to decent holidays – up to 32 days a year. Training is extensive, but shift patterns offer a chance to work part-time in other jobs. Firemen often spend many working hours over card games or snooker - or a spell of shopping. And real emergency calls are rare outside the busiest metropolitan stations. Draconian fire safety measures in factories, offices and hotels have slashed the number of real fires. Fire safety officers employed by all major companies cut the risk of a blaze. As a result, the service spends only ten per cent of its time responding to [emergency] calls. Of these, only one in ten

involve real fires - with comparatively few involving property. The rest are to attend rescue scenes, car smashes and hoax calls (*The Sun*, 2002, November 13).

Masked here is the very real danger faced by firefighters on the calls that involve actual fires. Other examples abounded. Referring to a typical night shift, one *Sun* journalist commented that firefighters “are able to put their feet up, make tea and coffee, cook meals, use the toilet, sleep and even watch the TV” (Pascoe-Watson, 2002), though quite why eating food and using a toilet are unpardonable sins was never explained. Another article drew reference to “the cushy lifestyle” of firefighters which was now endangered by the attention resulting from their “massive pay claim” (Kavanagh, 2002a). The term “cushy” is not necessarily the first adjective that would come to mind when describing the job of a firefighter who must routinely risk life and limb to protect the lives and property of others. Using short, declarative sentences, *The Sun* explained why the feted heroic firefighter is a myth: “People like and admire firemen. But they have also now reflected on some of the more cozy practices of the Fire Brigades Union. So working men and women look at firemen in a different way” (*The Sun*, 2002, November 27). In short, *The Sun* took a stridently anti-FBU stance that extended beyond criticism of the union to the firefighters themselves.

In addition to being greedy and lazy, firefighters are also presented as being callous. For *The Sun*, “if anything goes wrong or a child is burned to death, their superstar image will be permanently tarnished. Far from being public heroes, they will be condemned for playing with people’s lives” (*The Sun*, 2002, November 13). As the Iraq War loomed closer, there was greater emotional resonance to this presentation. Under the headline “FBU Take Our Hero,” the *News of the World* described how “one of Britain's finest military chiefs has been forced to ‘sit out’ the [Iraq] war because of striking firemen” (*News of the World*, 2003, March 30). Not only are the

striking firefighters depicted as a threat to the success of the military venture in Iraq, depriving the armed forces of one of its “finest military chiefs,” the headline’s term “take out” raises the bizarre notion of the FBU actively harming the military officer. This kind of oppositional rhetoric continues throughout *The Sun*’s coverage, where the firefighters and the FBU are depicted as villains and traitors. Major General Ken Perkins, cited as “*The Sun*’s military advisor,” is quoted saying “Traitor is a strong word but it fits [Andy] Gilchrist like a glove... We are also at war with the terrorists in our midst, a war where the firefighters have a front-line role. Yet Gilchrist has opted out” (*The Sun*, 2003, January 22). Meanwhile, in separate editorials barely a week apart, the *Daily Mail* attacked the FBU for using “this time of crisis as the opportunity to damage their country at its most vulnerable” (*Daily Mail*, 2003, March 14) and for threatening strike action that “pos[es] serious problems for our overstretched armed services, at the very moment they are risking their lives in the desert” (*Daily Mail*, 2003, March 20). Headlines stressed the FBU’s recklessness at a time of national emergency, such as the *Daily Mail*’s “Firemen Will Walk Out Despite Iraq Crisis” (*Daily Mail*, 2003, March 13) and *The People*’s “FBU Treachery in the Face of Battle” (*The People*, 2003, March 9). At a time of impending war, this was time to rally around the flag and put aside industrial quarrels. Firefighters are depicted as national traitors and enemies within for putting their own self-interest before the national interest.

The *Daily Mirror*, on the other hand, took issue with attacks on firefighters from people who had “never attended a fire in their lives” (*Daily Mirror*, 2002, November 13). Its comment pages were replete with references to the heroism of the firefighters and the villainy of the government. For the newspapers’ Tony Parsons:

The striking firemen I saw last week didn't seem like mad, drooling Reds who want to bring down Tony Blair. They seemed like brave, decent working men who want a proper living wage. Yet the newspapers are full of fat-bottomed, red-nosed columnists writing about what a soft, easy life it is for a fireman (Parsons, 2002).

Parsons then critiqued the charges leveled against the striking workers:

Many firemen have second jobs - as if anyone takes on a second job if the first job is paying the bills. Many firemen retire early on medical grounds - as if going in to burning buildings for a living wouldn't take a toll on your health (Parsons, 2002).

The newspaper itself rallied behind the union with a supportive editorial:

The firefighters' strike has degenerated into a dangerous, chaotic shambles. The responsibility for that lies squarely on the shoulders of the government. People have compared this to the Winter of Discontent but in many ways this is worse... The only way to solve a dispute of this kind is by compromise. The Fire Brigades Union has shown throughout it is prepared to do just that (*Daily Mirror*, 2002, November 25).

Unlike its right-wing rivals, the *Daily Mirror* also foregrounded the perspective of firefighters, allowing space for a discussion of the negative work culture and low pay that has set in. For example, one newly-resigned firefighter explained why he left, commenting that leaving the service was "the hardest thing I have ever had to do, but I just can't live on the wages. I'd rather take benefits while I look for another job than go on like this" (*Daily Mirror*, 2002, November 20). Another article offered reflection from a firefighter on the dangers of the job:

It's a dangerous job we do and those that say we don't deserve a pay rise should try entering a smoke filled building and carrying out the charred body of a child... We don't



risk our lives every day but the potential to lose our lives and for serious injury is there all the time (*Daily Mirror*, 2002, November 15).

Though it often used the same kind of personal language as its right-wing rivals, the *Daily Mirror* provided a perspective that was supportive of the union and critical of the government.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed the second key theme in tabloid newspaper coverage of the four strikes analyzed in this study, the use of panic and division to attack the striking trade unionists. Two sub-themes were presented. First, tabloid newspapers stressed the impact the strikes would have on the public. Second, they used a strategy of “divide and rule” to pit workers in different sectors of the economy against one another. I contend that these depictions indicate that organized labor still posed a threat to the interests of organized capital. If trade unions did not pose such a threat, the kind of panicked, hostile reception discussed here would have been absent. Throughout, the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun* used hostile, combative rhetoric that singled out trade union leaders for criticism, demonized the striking workers for the damage they were doing, and pitted workers in one sector of the economy against those in other sectors. The *Daily Mirror*, meanwhile, positioned itself squarely behind the striking workers, foregrounding the perspectives of the firefighters and blaming the government for its intransigence. The next chapter discusses a third theme prominent in tabloid newspaper discourse: the link between trade unions and the Labour Party.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### THE LABOUR PARTY-TRADE UNION LINK

Considered to be one of the reasons why Labour was “unelectable” in the 1980s (Leys, 1990; MacArthur, 1989; Minkin, 1986, 1992; Seyd, 1993), trade unions had a frosty relationship with Tony Blair, who pulled the Labour Party toward the centerground of British politics using Anthony Giddens’ theory of the “third way.” This chapter highlights another prominent theme in tabloid newspaper discourse on these selected strikes: The relationship between the unions and the Labour Party (specifically, its leaders). The chapter is structured into two sub-themes: (1) Tony Blair as the heir to Thatcher; and (2) The strikes under Gordon Brown’s leadership of Labour.

#### **Tony Blair – Heir to Thatcher?**

Tony Blair was a prominent feature in tabloid newspaper discourse on the FBU strike. This is not unusual; he was the serving Prime Minister at the time of a major public sector strike. What is noteworthy is the way the tabloids treated Blair, constructing him as the “heir” to the Thatcher legacy of strong anti-trade unionism. This was true of all three newspapers, albeit with nuances in interpretation and emphasis. For *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail*, Blair’s task was to finish the job Thatcher started by decimating an errant trade union movement:

Tony Blair squared up to striking firefighters yesterday with a battlecry that carried vivid echoes of Margaret Thatcher’s showdown with the miners. Deliberately drawing comparisons with that dispute, which ended in defeat for [then-National Union of Mineworkers President] Arthur Scargill in 1984, he said of the Fire Brigades Union:

“This is a strike they can't win.” “Scargillite” strikes by militant trade unions “are not coming back,” he said. “If we were to concede to these pay claims, the economic implications would be dire and have lasting damage.” Eighteen years on from the titanic struggle which broke the mighty National Union of Mineworkers, Mr. Blair’s uncompromising tone revived memories of the Thatcher “handbagging,” the no-nonsense denunciations of adversaries which became her trademark (Hughes, 2002b).

Here, the newspaper reminds its readers that the National Union of Mineworkers was defeated in the 1980s, just as Blair must, and surely will, defeat the Fire Brigades Union in the 2000s. Blair firmly draws a line in history in asserting that the pre-Thatcher days are gone and will not be coming back. The parallels with Scargill are intriguing because they provide a combative frame through which the strike can be understood: just as Thatcher faced down Scargill, so must Blair face down Gilchrist. The historical context was invoked by a *Daily Mail* editorial:

Suddenly, the kind of rhetoric and wrecking tactics once thought banished for good by Margaret Thatcher's hard-won union reforms are making a comeback. But whose fault is it that Ministers face a bruising battle with Gilchrist and his Leftwing allies, and feel forced to draw up no-strike legislation for the fire service? Lady Thatcher’s reforms brought industrial peace and paved the way for moderate union leaders. New Labour’s diluting of those reforms and acceptance of union-friendly legislation from Brussels has encouraged the return of the militants. If the nation is plunged into a series of disruptive public sector strikes, the danger to Mr. Blair is clear. Middle Britain, which accepted his assurances that the country would be safe in his hands, could exact a heavy electoral price for its disillusionment (*Daily Mail*, 2002, December 2).

The strike is depicted as a titanic struggle where the stakes are high: The need to reinforce the Thatcher inheritance of “hard-won union reforms” and “moderate union leaders” (put another way, *compliant* union leaders). One columnist wrote that Andy Gilchrist “evokes in the most liberal among us a certain yearning for Margaret Thatcher” (Stephens, 2002) drawing to memory the Prime Minister whose most (in)famous achievement, arguably, was the smashing of the unions. The commentator suggests that it is time somebody did to the firefighters what Thatcher did to the miners; namely, to break them, and that somebody is Tony Blair.

The government’s approach to the unions was illustrated in one report that quoted an aide of the Prime Minister saying “These men don’t know what is about to hit them... We are going to have their legs off” (Walters, 2002). Though unnamed sources are part and parcel of political reporting, what is illustrative here is the violence of the rhetoric against men and women who put their lives on the line in the name of public service. A *Sun* editorial praised Blair for showing his “steel” in “tak[ing] on the picket bullies – like Margaret Thatcher did... in the 1980s” (*The Sun*, 2002, November 22), describing the strike as “a pivotal moment for this Prime Minister... Tony has to stand up to the FBU and he has to win... This is Blair’s equivalent of Margaret Thatcher’s miners’ strike. The result will affect his place in history” (*The Sun*, 2002, November 22). The *Daily Mirror* got in on the act by quoting rank-and-file firefighter David Tonner: “This is Tony Blair’s miners - like Thatcher did with them, he wants to destroy us” (Hardy, 2003, January 29), as well as having a headline titled “Are the Posties the New Miners?” (Thompson, 2009). While the *Mirror* painted this as a tragedy, for the right-wing tabloids this was something to celebrate: a Labour Prime Minister “taking on” the unions and showing them who is boss, just as Thatcher did in the 1980s. Throughout, the FBU strike was depicted as a test of Tony Blair’s nerve and a public demonstration of his loyalties. This was, as one headline attested, “A Fight to the Finish...”

With Only One Winner” (*The Sun*, 2002, November 22). The newspapers played up the magnitude of the FBU strike, indicating the levity with which trade unions should be taken in the twenty-first century. Far from irrelevant, trade unions have the potential to challenge the political establishment. Blair’s personal opinions regarding the unions were the subject of a *Mail on Sunday* column written by the former advisor to Gordon Brown, Charlie Whelan. According to Whelan:

The reality is that Tony Blair hates union leaders. When I worked as an advisor to Gordon Brown, there were countless occasions when I heard Blair swear about “f\*\*\*\*\* Edmonds” (John Edmonds, general secretary of the GMB union) and “that f\*\*\*\*\* Bickerstaffe” (Rodney Bickerstaffe, leader of the public services union Unison). He calls in union leaders for cozy chats at No. 10 and puts on the charm, but once they are out of the door he uses a very different language, much of it unrepeatable. I have rarely heard him say anything nice about them. Yet he never has a bad word to say about businessmen (Whelan, 2002b).

While we should not take one man’s word as gospel, when allied to the anonymous briefings and public statements offered above we get a picture of a Labour leader who actively disliked the labor movement.

The strike was depicted as a struggle over the heart and soul of the Labour Party. For *The Sun*, the specter of “Old Labour,” dominated by the unions, lay on the horizon if Blair did not succeed: “If Blair fails in this fight, New Labour will have lost a pivotal battle to the forces of Old Labour. And every other public sector union will fancy their chances” (*The Sun*, 2002, November 15). According to the newspaper’s political columnist, Blair faced “all-out war... with left-wingers eager to seize control of Labour” (Kavanagh, 2002b), while columnist Richard

Littlejohn referred to how trade union leaders “hate Blair and have been itching for a fight” (Littlejohn, 2002). *The Sun* quoted Blair saying, “This is 2002, not 1984. Life has changed. Those days are over. They are not coming back under any government – and certainly not this one... This is a different Labour government from any other...,” with the newspaper adding that Blair “vowed he will never allow the Left to bring back the strike-crazy 1970s that kept Labour out of power for 18 years” (Kavanagh, 2002b). The dividing lines are drawn here: Old Labour was beholden to the unions, New Labour is not. Blair is depicted as having good reason for not wanting to see the return of Old Labour, for trade unions are “the reason why Labour always fails in government,” according to a *Mail* columnist (McKay, 2002). For this reason, Blair was said to be “determined to face down a resurgence of the union militancy which cast Labour into the political wilderness two decades ago” (Hughes, 2002a). Trade unions were presented as an albatross around New Labour’s neck, an old-fashioned anchor to a bygone era that the party leadership would be very happy to be rid of. Blair’s quote above is illustrative: “This is 2002, not 1984.” In the post-Thatcher political and economic landscape, there is no space for an aggressive trade union movement. When one adds to this the fact that trade unions are viewed as politically toxic, we can grasp the complex situation trade unions face when taking strike action.

The *Daily Mirror* supported the striking firefighters through its editorial pages. It also engaged with the narrative that this was an important issue regarding the future direction of the Labour Party and that Blair was the heir to Thatcher. For this newspaper, however, it was a tragedy that Blair took such a strong anti-union stance. The paper’s columnist Brian Reade struck a critical tone in his condemnation of Blair:

Blair wants a fight with the public sector workers and firemen are the perfect fall-guys.

When the first corpse is pulled from the flames how many commentators will label them

red wreckers, killing innocent people with their greed? How easy will it be for Blair to snatch Thatcher's mantle and claim to be standing up to vicious bullies?" (Reade, 2002).

This perspective was reinforced throughout the *Daily Mirror*'s various commentators. Charlie Whelan, for example, wrote that it was

time for Tony Blair to get his tanks off the firefighters' forecourts. The PM may think that smashing trade unions will boost his macho image but forgets at his peril that firefighters are heroes and most of us think they're worth £30,000 a year for daily risking their lives" (Whelan, 2002, November 19).

Whelan went on to state that Blair "just wants to give the unions a bloody nose" and "smash the Fire Brigades Union." According to Whelan, Blair acted deliberately to "provoke the firefighters... by threatening that the Army would break their picket lines" (Whelan, 2002). The *Mirror* also reported that Tony Blair's father-in-law, the actor Tony Booth, supported the FBU strike:

Actor Tony Booth, 67, said the Fire Brigades Union were "boxed into a corner" and had no option but to take industrial action. In his local newspaper, he added: "This is a situation they neither wanted nor sought... I believe, along with the majority of the public, the FBU demands are just" (*Daily Mirror*, 2002, November 29).

By bringing Booth into the debate, the *Mirror* highlighted the tension between the Labour Party as an institution of government and the labor movement as the collective voice of the working class, with Tony Blair at its nexus. Booth was used, perhaps, as a reminder of where Blair's loyalties ought to lie.

Meanwhile, the *Mirror*'s columnist Paul Routledge exclaimed that "if [Blair] wants to know who is at fault, he should look in the mirror" (Routledge, 2002). Blair was presented as a traitor to the labor movement, as one commentator explained:

It looks as if macho Labour wants a fight to the death with the FBU. Is this what we want? I did not vote Labour to destroy a proud trade union that represents men and women who put their lives on the line. The Tories are backing Blair against the firefighters and that tells us everything. The policy is wrong, wrong, wrong (Routledge, 2002).

The correct role for the Labour Party, for this commentator, would be to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with trade unions when they are under threat. However, the aggressor in this case is the government itself, and Blair showed no sign of backing down. The same commentator ultimately reached the following conclusion in a later commentary:

Working people are finally facing up to the unpalatable reality that New Labour is fake Labour... This is a self-serving government that has squandered the goodwill of its natural supporters. A government that is so absorbed in its self-importance that it has forgotten where it came from. Well, they might have forgotten. We haven't. And we will remember when the time comes (Routledge, 2003a).

Labour has moved away from its roots, which this commentator tacitly affirmed as the readership of the *Daily Mirror* with the collective "we." It is not just the commentator or the union that has been betrayed but the entire working class, who, according to the commentator, now have nobody on their side as the major parties are all aligned around a neoliberal consensus.

The *Mirror* afforded space for dissident voices to the party leadership, such as John McDonnell, a Labour Member of Parliament who argued that Blair's handling of the strike was



“highly reminiscent of the way that Thatcher dealt with the miners” (*Daily Mirror*, 2003, January 11) and General Secretary of the GMB union Paul Kenny, who warned of “civil war in the labor movement” (Hardy, 2003). In both the right- and left-leaning tabloids, Blair was positioned as an obstacle to the aims of the FBU and, indeed, to organized labor as a whole. He was presented as a Labour leader at odds with his movement, the true heir to the Thatcher inheritance. As the strike came to a close, the *Mirror*’s Paul Routledge offered this reflection:

[T]his dispute has brought out all the worst in New Labour. The dislike of trade unions. The disdain for working people. The readiness to use a huge Commons majority to smash those who dare to oppose it... No wonder that so many unions are scaling back their affiliation to the Labour Party. And individuals are walking away in their thousands. Membership is down to 250,000. John Prescott, self-appointed hammer of the FBU, predicted it would grow to a million... I would not be surprised if the FBU decides to disaffiliate from the Labour Party. I would understand that, but it would be wrong. The rest of us need the strong, progressive voice that your union has always offered. Blair is not forever, and Blairism is practically finished. Stay and complete the job (Routledge, 2003b).

Ultimately, the FBU would disaffiliate from the Labour Party. Routledge’s comments, considered in the context of this discourse, reveal the core tension at the heart of the relationship between New Labour and the trade unions. “Blairism,” as an ideology that operates under the long shadow cast by Thatcherism, and the goals of the trade union movement are revealed to be unaligned. Routledge’s comments are all the more elegiac because they conjure a sense of Labour’s lost past, of a party that defended the working class. They demonstrate the reality that

Labour has wandered far from its roots.

### **Strikes under Gordon Brown**

Tony Blair resigned as leader of the Labour Party in June 2007 and was succeeded by Gordon Brown, who was immediately confronted with an industrial dispute to manage by way of the CWU strike. As with the FBU strike, the Labour Party refused to support a strike by one of its own affiliated unions. One *Mirror* columnist was eager to discover what the strike and Labour's response to it would reveal about the ideological inclinations of Blair's successor:

Above all, this is a dispute from which a Labour government cannot stand aside... This affair will be a test case for the new Gordon Brown government. If he looks to conciliation, that will be a signal to the core Labour vote. If he sides with the bosses, we know what we are in for (Routledge, 2007a).

Routledge's strident "Old Labour" positions him as something of a Labour traditionalist. For him, the jury was still out on Gordon Brown, though he holds out hope that Brown will take the side of the striking workers. The strike was presented as a litmus test through which Brown's loyalties could be ascertained. The *Daily Mail* noted in more declarative fashion that

the postmen cannot count on support from the Government, despite its donations to the Labour Party. Postal Services Minister Jim Fitzpatrick warned: "It is our view that a strike would damage the industry; therefore we do not think it is in the best interests of the company, or individual staff members" (*Daily Mail*, 2007, June 8).

Here, the newspaper reminds its readers that trade unions support the Labour Party but the Labour Party does not support the trade unions.

As the strike went on, Labour took an increasingly oppositional stance, with Gordon Brown quoted telling MPs, “There is no justification for this dispute. It should be ended on the terms offered. I urge the workforce to go back to work” (*The Sun*, 2007, October 11). The *Mirror*’s Routledge expressed his disappointment:

I suspect the real intention is to turn the workforce into an army of low-paid casuals supplied by blood-sucking private employment agencies. They picked a fight over pay, hoping the posties would become too battle-weary to fight for their jobs. This is a classic Thatcherite strategy. It has no place under a government that calls itself Labour (Routledge, 2007c).

This raises the question of what constitutes a “real” Labour Party, which for this commentator would entail the defense of trade unions that are under attack. For Routledge, New Labour is a wolf in sheep’s clothing and not a true representation of Labour Party ideology and values.

Another report suggested that there were tensions in the Labour-union relationship as a result of Labour’s handling of the strike:

Furious union bosses representing 800,000 workers are threatening to dump Labour - costing £5 million in donations for the party's election war chest. The 240,000-strong Communications Workers Union is seething over the way Gordon Brown has treated its striking postal workers (Nelson, 2007).

Though the CWU, unlike the FBU, would ultimately remain affiliated with the Labour Party, we do get a strong sense that things are not ideal between Labour and the unions.

When it came to the second CWU strike, the narrative of Labour as distanced from the trade unions seemed embedded. Peter Mandelson, the Business Secretary charged with overseeing the Royal Mail, was a prominent feature in the coverage of this strike. The key

contention of the strike was modernization (one again), with Mandelson accused of attempting to privatize the institution. Mandelson is a central figure in this strike, portrayed as the *bête noire* of the labor movement:

[T]he Government's failure to get to grips earlier with what would be a catastrophic dispute is another example of Labour's drift. Peter Mandelson sounds suspiciously as if he's sulking after the posties' union scuppered his privatization plot... I wonder if Brown, Mandelson and the rest of the Cabinet appreciate the terrible damage to Labour should the strikes go ahead. The banksters [sic] brought this Government to its knees and it would be a tragedy if we heard a faint echo of the so-called Winter of Discontent that did for Callaghan 30 years ago... Maggie Mandy's making a fatal error if he thinks attacking the posties would boost Labour's appeal to Middle Britain. It wouldn't... but it would alienate Labour's traditional base (Maguire, 2009).

Here, the *Daily Mirror's* political correspondent Kevin Maguire draws clear dividing lines between Labour's "traditional base" and Peter Mandelson, dubbed "Maggie Mandy." Maguire uses alliterative ridicule to question Mandelson's sincerity to Labour values, by attaching Margaret Thatcher's first name to his last name.

Aside from its experience dealing with striking postal workers, Brown's government experiences another strike, this time having to deal with the Lindsey Oil Refinery strike of 2009. The strike emerged, as discussed in Chapter Four, as a result of a refinery dismissing its British-born workforce and hiring Italian workers on cheaper contracts, bringing them to the United Kingdom under European Union free movement of labor laws that allow citizens of EU countries the right to employment in any other EU country. Brown's own words played a key role in the strike's origins:

Many placards directed their fury at Mr. Brown's pledge at the Labour party conference in September 2007 when he said: "This is our vision: Britain leading the global economy... drawing on the talents of all to create British jobs for British workers" (Barrow & Sims, 2009a).

"British jobs for British workers" became the central issue running through the strike, with the sacked workers feeling they had been treated unfairly and should lay claim to the positions at the refinery. The strike spawned "wildcat" or sympathy strikes across the country as workers downed tools in a show solidarity.

The legality of the company's actions was used as a way of demonstrating Brown's folly in promising what he could not possibly deliver in an age of globalized markets: "The protests are an embarrassment for the PM, who has promised to safeguard British jobs... But the PM's scope to act is limited by laws which saw EU citizens have the right to work anywhere in the bloc" (O'Boyle, 2009). The official response from the Labour government was half-hearted at best:

Employment minister Pat McFadden insisted that he is sympathetic to the workers' concerns, but cannot endorse illegal strike action. He said: "I understand people's concern about employment issues. Jobs are a concern in every community in the country because of impacts of the global downturn. But we can't and don't support unofficial strike action" (Barrow & Sims, 2009a).

Newspapers presented the Labour Party as being in a difficult position: its leader had promised "British jobs for British workers" (a promise that had no legal basis) and now the party found itself dealing with the repercussions of globalization and the neoliberal ideal of free movement of

labor being challenged. The *Daily Mirror*'s Tony Parsons summarized these concerns, under the headline, "The Strikers Did the Job that Gordon Failed to do":

Under European Union employment laws, it is completely legal to import cheap foreign labor into this country. That is why Gordon Brown's "British jobs for British workers" was always going to be revealed as an empty sweet nothing. In the wake of the strike at Lindsey oil refinery, where French-owned Total UK brought in Italian and Portuguese workers for their North Lincolnshire plant, the Prime Minister is now backtracking like mad. He claims that he just meant he wanted to give British workers the skills they need, no but yes but, blah blah blah. Gordon - you are in a hole. Put down that shovel. Stop digging, mate (Parsons, 2009).

Gordon Brown is painted as a Prime Minister who has let down British workers by promising what he cannot possibly provide. However, as the aforementioned headline indicates, the workers more than rose to the challenge, for Parsons. This suggests that against a legal framework that on the one hand outlaws wildcat strikes and on the other allows the free movement of labor that undermines union-negotiated contracts, it is ethical for workers to take whatever action is necessary to protect their jobs.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed the issue of the relationship between the Labour Party and the labor movement, as presented in tabloid newspaper discourse on selected strikes. The tabloids presented Tony Blair as the heir to Thatcher inheritance, while Gordon Brown's approach to organized ultimately satisfied nobody (at least, if the newspapers were to be believed). For *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail*, unions were a thorn in the side of New Labour as well as the country.

For the *Daily Mirror*, the Labour Party had betrayed its roots as a result of its failure to support striking workers, leading to insinuations that Blair and Brown's "New Labour" was not an authentic representation of traditional Labour Party values. The chapter closed with a discussion of Brown's handling of the Lindsey Oil Refinery strike and the "wildcat" strikes it engendered; this provides a useful segue into the next chapter, which discusses the issue of immigration and how it intersects with industrial relations, as represented in the pages of the tabloid press.

## CHAPTER NINE

### TRADE UNIONS, NEOLIBERALISM, AND IMMIGRATION

Immigration was raised as an issue in tabloid newspaper coverage of the CWU and Lindsey Oil Refinery strikes as a result, on both cases, of immigrant labor being used to displace domestic labor. That immigration became an issue is perhaps unsurprising, for neoliberalism has exposed the “contradictory logic of sovereign borders” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001, p. 145). Nation-states must wrestle with the tensions created by the competing logics of economic openness and control of membership of the national community, for the neoliberal ideology of open borders, flexible labor markets, and unfettered flows of goods and people is a counterforce to nationalism, whose logic fixes each person within one nation. This chapter is divided into two sub-themes: (1) Poles being brought in as emergency cover for striking postal workers and (2) The tension between neoliberalism and organized labor raised by the Lindsey Oil Refinery strikes.

#### **Polish Postmen**

Immigration is first mentioned in tabloid newspapers during the CWU strike of 2007, when Polish immigrant workers are hired to “clear the backlog” of letters and parcels that accumulated through the strike. The context here is the arrival of European immigrants as a result of European Union free movement of labor laws that dictate that European Union member states must open their borders and allow any citizen of another member state the same rights to employment as a citizen of their own. Against the backdrop of a striking workforce, this became a controversial issue, and found expression in the pages of the *Daily Mirror*:



Royal Mail has been accused of hiring “Polish scabs” to break the pay strike by workers. Up to 130,000 staff began a second 24-hour walkout at 7pm last night. Insiders claimed a “bus load” of workers, including a large number of Poles, were moved into the Watford mail center yesterday afternoon. One worker said: “A lot of them can hardly speak English. I don't know how they will be able to sort the mail” (*Daily Mirror*, 2007, July 13).

That this was raised as an issue and deemed newsworthy is significant. As noted above, Poles and other EU citizens possess the same employment rights in Britain as British nationals (and vice versa). Therefore, one would assume that the nationality of the substitute or “scab” workers would be irrelevant. However, the *Daily Mirror* deemed it newsworthy, focusing on the nationality of the substitute laborers.

Shortly afterward, another mention is made of the new Polish staff, again in the pages of the *Daily Mirror*:

Management have deepened resentment by hiring casual staff to clear the backlog caused by last week's 24-hour stoppage. The *Mirror* has learned they are being paid around £5.50 an hour compared with £12 an hour posties earn when working overtime (Manning, 2007b).

What this indicates is how the free movement of labor engendered by European Union laws allows for a “race to the bottom” where immigrant labor undercuts domestic labor by being willing to work for less. These replacement workers are working for a far lower rate than that of the striking workers, an attractive prospect for the Royal Mail in a time of economic fragility. The *Mirror's* columnist Paul Routledge took issue with this:

Post chiefs have hired hundreds of Polish casuals to break an official dispute... Let us not mince words. These are blacklegs. And I'm not surprised postal workers in Bristol and Glasgow are up in arms at the use of scab labor to beat them into submission. Importing Poles to break the strike threatens to trigger strife in an industry that has enjoyed good race relations for years. It is a crazy act of a desperate management – and the politicians in charge of Royal Mail should end it now. And the Poles themselves... should be utterly ashamed of conniving with the boss class here. British trade unionists – including the posties – gave international support to Polish workers in their hour of struggle under Lech Walesa in the 80s. They are owed a debt of gratitude... [T]he cause of migrant workers... cannot be at the expense of British jobs and British trade union freedom (Routledge, 2007b).

For Routledge, that Polish immigrants are undercutting domestic workers is a source of shame. Poles are depicted as complicit in the “race to the bottom,” stabbing the British union movement in the back despite the support British trade unionism provided for Poles during their struggles under communism. Now, Poles are “conniving with the boss class.” As mentioned previously, Routledge’s approach to industrial relations is characteristic of the *Daily Mirror*’s generally “Old Labour” outlook, which is to be stridently pro-union.

Though immigration only appears briefly in the CWU coverage, it is important as an indication of an undercurrent of frustration bubbling beneath the surface and a harbinger of what is to come. The gambit Routledge poses is that free movement of labor and a strong union movement are inimical, and where European immigration weakens the hand of British trade unions to advance the interests of their members, it is problematic. This is a delicate line for a left-leaning newspaper to pursue, as the *Mirror* is not known for the xenophobia that

characterizes the right-wing tabloid newspapers yet communicates to an audience comprised largely of waged laborers, the very people whose job security and prospects may very well be diminished by European immigration.

### **“British Jobs for British Workers”**

Immigration would return in the Lindsey Oil Refinery discourse and would quickly become the dominant frame around which that strike was constructed. The strike was organized when workers in the refinery were summarily dismissed and replaced by European immigrant laborers on cheaper contracts. This led to workers in refineries and plants across the country downing tools in sympathy or “wildcat” strikes, which have been illegal since the Thatcher reforms of the 1980s. The strikers used a quote from Prime Minister Gordon Brown as proof for their case:

To Prime Minister Gordon Brown’s embarrassment, the strikers used his pledge in September 2007 of “British jobs for British workers” as their campaign slogan. The quote was used on posters by the engineering construction workers who resented losing out to foreign workers (Barrow, 2009).

One interesting aspect of the coverage was what it did *not* focus on. Wildcat strikes have been illegal in the United Kingdom since the Thatcher reforms of the 1980s. One would reasonably have expected that this be a prominent issue in tabloid newspaper coverage, given that the prior chapters (and prior literature) have established the existence of a strong Thatcherite inclination in *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail*. In particular, one would have expected it to be a prominent issue in the newspapers’ editorials and opinion columns. This was not the case. In fact, the closest thing

to a condemnation of a strike came in one report in the news section of the *Daily Mail*, which offered the following critiques of the strike:

Downing Street criticized the strikers. “The Government’s view is that unofficial strike action and demonstrations are never the right response to industrial relations problems,” a spokesman said. Alistair Tebbit, of the Institute of Directors, said the emergence of illegal strikes was “deeply worrying.” He added: “Ministers must not allow illegal strikes to become commonplace” (Poulter & Sims, 2009).

Otherwise, tabloid newspapers evaded specific focus on the legality of the strikes, often using substitute words such as “unofficial.” What is interesting here is that the strikes were unequivocally in violation of the law. This indicates that immigration cast such a large shadow over the debate as a whole that the method by which the union chose to raise the issue was not deemed newsworthy. As mentioned in Chapter Three, journalism consists of choices about what issues will be covered and what will not, and about how those issues are covered. The focus here could just as easily been on the illegality of the strikes, with editorials and columnists condemning the strikes as a violation of the law, a reactionary response to the smooth workings of the capitalist economic system, or even a xenophobic attack on foreign workers. That this was not at all prominent in the coverage reveals a lot about what tabloid newspapers considered to be newsworthy.

Reports consistently placed this strike within the context of immigration to the United Kingdom. For example, the headline of a *Daily Mail* editorial asserted that Britain was “Paying the Price for Dropping Our Guard” (*Daily Mail*, 2009, February 3), arguing that the Lindsey Oil Refinery incident and subsequent wildcat action was the result of unchecked immigration and a government that had lost all control of its borders. One report on strike action concluded by

adding, “There is also anger over figures showing the number of non-UK born workers increased by 214,000 in the year to December 2008, while the UK-born workforce shrank by 278,000” (Koster, 2009). Other articles made brief mention of the strike before going on to what was constructed as the truly newsworthy issue here, that of mass immigration and its effect on the British economy, as illustrated by this report from *The Sun*:

The number of jobless is set to hit a record 3.5 million, the government secretly believes. Work and Pensions officials have been told to calculate benefit budgets based on unemployment reaching its highest-ever level by October 2010. The previous unemployment peak was 3.2 million in 1984. Meanwhile record numbers of jobs are going to FOREIGN workers - and soaring REPOSSESSIONS will throw 145,000 families out of their homes this year... Official figures show that since 1999 the number of Britons employed in the UK has gone up just 1.6 per cent. But the number from the EU has risen 147 per cent – and those from Eastern European nations such as Poland and Latvia has ballooned an astonishing 3,500 per cent (Mahmood, 2009).

Note the language used here: “Highest-ever,” “peak,” “record number,” and “soaring” used in quick succession to dazzle the reader with an array of startling facts designed to catch their attention and help them grasp the enormity of the situation. This was reinforced by the capitalization of “foreign” and “repossessions,” adding to the sense of drama and urgency. There is a tangible sense of disbelief that this is allowed to occur; that “FOREIGN workers” are achieving things that the indigenous population are unable to. Overall, immigration is the master narrative, with the strike a “jumping off point” for a larger discussion. Consider this example from the *Daily Mail*:

The strikes, which threaten to disrupt energy supplies, are being led by workers angry that the French oil company Total is using an Italian firm which employs Italian and Portuguese workers to carry out maintenance at the plant. From dawn, thousands of angry workers stood on picket lines in freezing conditions in a wave of illegal strikes not seen for decades (Barrow & Sims, 2009a).

Though what the newspaper presents is factual, it is noteworthy to see so many foreign countries listed in such quick succession. Workers “shared their fury and their fears for the future” at the involvement of French and Italian firms using Italian and Portuguese labor, rather than British labor. Again, it is immigration that is the key concern.

The *Daily Mirror* joined the *Daily Mail* in sounding the alarm, so to speak, about the conflict between free movement of labor on the one hand and the rights of unionized workers on the other, in this example drawing parallels between events at Lindsey Oil Refinery and another instance where immigration and organized labor collided:

A deal to break the deadlock in an unofficial strike over foreign workers is expected to be put to a vote today. After lengthy talks, bosses are believed to have agreed that half the 200 jobs allocated by contract to Italian and Portuguese staff should go to UK workers... Derek Simpson, joint leader of the union Unite, said: “This unofficial action is not about race. It's about class - and employers who exploit workers regardless of their nationality.” Meanwhile it was revealed that a British supply ship that has served the Falklands for 26 years is losing its £40 million [Ministry of Defense] contract - to a Dutch ship crewed by cheap-labor Filipinos. Union chiefs slammed the decision to axe the Glasgow-owned Saint Brandan as “cost-cutting madness” (*Daily Mirror*, 2009, February 4).

The narrative here is that not only are British workers losing out to Italian and Portuguese workers in one part of the country, they are losing out to “cheap-labor” Filipinos working on a “Dutch ship” in another part of the country. The tensions raised by neoliberalism are foregrounded in this excerpt from a *Daily Mail* report:

Ministers were also warned yesterday of possible increasing “hostility” between migrants and the indigenous population as unemployment worsens. Trevor Phillips, head of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, said British workers could find themselves “edged out.” In a potentially incendiary intervention, he said those at the Lindsey Oil Refinery, who staged strikes over the use of EU workers this year, were “put simply, not productive or competitive enough” (O’Sullivan, 2009).

Phillips’ comments reinforce a neoliberal master narrative that competitiveness is central to the modern economy and workers who are not “competitive” will suffer, while overall the frame is of immigration and of the potential damage it can do. The Lindsey Oil Refinery is used as but one example of the potential racial tension that can erupt should immigration not be controlled. Striking workers (and their foreign replacements) become pawns in a much larger network.

Business Secretary Peter Mandelson responded by arguing that under EU free movement of labor laws, British workers could just as easily move to mainland Europe to seek work. However, he is taken to task by the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Mirror* for his comments. A *Daily Mail* article analyzed “pay, tax and benefits for a construction worker on average wages in various EU countries reveals how those who come here for work are far better off than Britons who go abroad” and arrives at the conclusion that while Mandelson claims “jobless British workers can benefit from going elsewhere in the EU to find work,” the reality is that “if they do,

they will find it hard to find a good deal” (Barrow & Sims, 2009b). Meanwhile, if we accept the *Daily Mail*'s reading of events, Britain is awash with immigrants:

Immigrants who arrived in Britain during the economic boom are unlikely to return home in the recession, ministers were warned yesterday. “Strong social and family ties” would prevent them from moving on, the Migration Policy Institute think tank said. But critics suggested the main reason they would not leave is Britain's generous welfare system – and the fact that jobs are just as scarce in their own countries (O’Sullivan, 2009).

The impression is created of Britain as a naïve country flinging its borders open to all who would seek to reside on its soil and take advantage of its “generous welfare system” while Britons seeking to take advantage of the same free movement of labor laws would find themselves at a structural disadvantage. Another example of this kind of frame is the following excerpt:

Last year a record number of work permits, 151,000, were handed out. The latest move comes amid deepening tension over scarce jobs going to foreign workers and follows the wave of wildcat strikes over the employment of foreign workers at the Lindsey oil refinery in Lincolnshire (Doughty, 2009).

One report briefly mentions the Lindsey Oil Refinery strike, before discussing a study by the pressure group Migrationwatch UK that “revealed that British workers are also losing out under EU free movement rules. Europeans taking advantage of the rules to work here outnumber Britons working elsewhere in the EU by more than four to one” (Slack, 2009a). Another report quoted Sir Andrew Green, chairman of Migrationwatch UK, asking “Are British workers being given a fair chance to get the jobs, and are their wages being undercut?” (Slack, 2009b). For the *Daily Mail*, it is immigration that is the issue and the strike is a manifestation of this “bigger picture.”



Trade unions are similarly situated as part of a broader network, voicing the concerns of the released domestic workers, as highlighted in the excerpt from the *Daily Mail*:

The prospect of bitter strike action was looming last night over claims that British power station workers are being ‘undercut’ by Poles prepared to work for £4 an hour less. Union leaders are planning a series of protests after it emerged that hundreds of jobs at the Isle of Grain site in Kent are being taken by Eastern Europeans – despite local workers being available. Officials said they were handed a copy of a contract for a successful Polish worker, which showed a wage rate of £10.01 an hour rather than a nationally agreed rate of £14. The GMB [union] said it has made available the names of 350 people looking for work at the power plant – but none has been offered a job so far. The union said it understood all of the jobs so far allocated - around 250 - have been given to Polish workers. A second contract, which has a further 250 jobs, is due to be announced shortly. However, union leaders fear British workers will also miss out on this contract (Slack, 2009b).

Unions found themselves in a difficult position of on the one hand protesting the unfairness of a law that they argue places British workers at a disadvantage and on the other hand wanting to eschew the politics of xenophobia:

Unions risk stoking extremism by striking over foreign workers, a senior MP warned last night. Labour’s Keith Vaz admitted Gordon Brown triggered the row with his empty promise of “British jobs for British workers.” He claimed the phrase, and the wildcat stoppages, played into the hands of the far right... He said: “It’s sad to see the union involved in what has got more than a hint of xenophobia.” But Derek Simpson, leader of

two-million strong Unite, said: “It's not about race or immigration. It's about employers exploiting workers” (Wooding, 2009).

Contrary to Simpson's argument, the issue raised by the Lindsey Oil Refinery strike is not an either/or but is about race, immigration, *and* neoliberalism and how they intersect. The Lindsey Oil Refinery strike is the site where race and class collide in spectacular fashion, all under the auspices of neoliberalism, as best demonstrated by a *Daily Mirror* headline which pleaded, “Save Our British Jobs” (O'Boyle, 2009, January 31). The headline betrays a sentiment that despite the immigrant workers having legal entitlement to the jobs, “morally” (and I use the term loosely) those jobs belong to British people. The strike raises fundamental questions about unions and how they negotiate their relationship with the free movement of labor laws and with immigrants, when faced with the material reality of wages being undercut by cheap foreign labor that negates at a stroke the purpose of trade unions. How do trade unions navigate this issue? This issue is arguably one of the most important facing trade unionism in the twenty-first century.

This strike was noteworthy because, more so than the previous three strikes, tabloid newspaper coverage featured a much greater insight into the perspectives of the striking workers. One reason behind this is the fact that it was an unofficial strike unsanctioned by a union bureaucracy. While the trade union movement does indeed rally behind the striking workers and its representatives are prominent in tabloid newspaper coverage, it is interesting that it is the perspectives of the ordinary workers that drive the news agenda here. The rank-and-file views provided are uniformly opposed to the process by which the domestic workers have been displaced. To take just one exemplar:

Laborer Kyle Upton, 20, who lives on the Isle of Grain, said: “I contacted Alstom about work and was told positions were all taken. Then I found out some Polish laborers who worked with me on another project had been given jobs. Lots of local people like me are left out in the cold. Foreigners will work for much less money and we are not being given a chance to compete” (Myers, 2009).

The perspectives of the workforce are used to highlight the injustices of free movement of labor. The *Daily Mail*, which rarely featured the views of trade union members in its coverage of the FBU or either CWU strikes, went on a veritable tour of Britain getting workers’ perspectives when it comes to the Lindsey Oil Refinery strike and its nation-wide repercussions:

David Winterburn, a 54- year-old scaffolder from Grimsby who works at [Lindsey Oil Refinery], said: “This is an absolute disgrace. The Italian workers are supposed to be highly skilled – but what about the British? Aren’t we also highly skilled? Gordon Brown promised British jobs for British workers and he has got to stick by that.” WILTON, TEESSIDE: [...] Flyers were handed out which read: “We must defend our right to work in our own country. We do not want to be on the dole while foreigners do our jobs”... MARCHWOOD, HAMPSHIRE: [...] One worker, who wished to remain anonymous, claimed: “Only about one fifth of workers on the site are British and I think that has been causing anger for a number of years. This is why we have taken this decision and decided to support other workers nationally who have.” ABERTHAW POWER STATION, BARRY, SOUTH WALES: [...] Meurig Thomas, 61, a member of the Unite union, said: “We are in a recession – we all know that and British workers are being made redundant all over the country. These British people should be taken on, retrained and get the jobs that are going to foreign workers” (Barrow & Sims, 2009a).

The foregrounding of workers' perspectives draws the reader into the perspective of people of his or her social standing, in an effort to persuade them of the rightness of the strikers' cause.

The contrast between the near-absence of rank-and-file perspectives in the other three strikes and their prominence in this one is striking. Again, news is about *choices*. Decisions were made to seek these rank-and-file views on the grounds of newsworthiness. It displays a great deal, I would argue, about the political priorities of this newspaper that it suddenly cares about the perspectives of ordinary workers when there is a far bigger threat to face off – namely, the European Union.

One of the most interesting aspects of this strike was how the *Daily Mirror's* opinion columnists discussed it. The newspapers' columnists all offered strong support for all of the striking workers in the four strikes examined in this study, and this strike is no exception. Of interest, however, is the specific line adopted by the commentators and how it relates to immigration. For the newspapers' Brian Reade:

My mate Dave went on strike at Stanlow oil refinery this week in support of the men at Lindsey. He's a top-grade electrician who's done the job for 34 years and hadn't downed tools for two decades. Like most sparks who build or maintain large sites, especially in the north, he's taken plenty of knocks in a job where you receive no sick pay, no pension perks and are regularly sent down the road without notice or pay-off. It takes a lot to anger him. But this week he was raging at the reaction to his vote for strike action in support of Lincolnshire colleagues. He didn't walk out, because, as [Peter] Mandelson believes, he's xenophobic, but because he's seen his wage differential – earned through skill, qualifications and experience – threatened over recent years by firms bringing in cheap foreign labor. He's seen collective agreements ripped up and mates priced out of

jobs by bosses who've taken on cut-rate East European workers. The Italians flown into Lincolnshire via unaccountable sub-contracting practices to cut labor costs were simply the final straw (Reade, 2009).

Reade rejected the criticism of the striking workers that in striking they were fuelling the politics of xenophobia and highlighted the very real issue of how immigration functions as a tool of neoliberal economics to create a race to the bottom, where workers from one country undercut workers from another country by offering labor for cheaper. Reade highlighted the predicament that trade unions find themselves in, of treading a very delicate line of protecting the interests of their members and avoiding xenophobia. Reade went on to develop his argument:

What these skilled workers see happening is a pay structure they have fought for and earned over many years being dismantled. And they won't give in without a fight... These insinuations of racism from careerist politicians who have never got their hands dirty doing proper work are outrageous... They're smug suits who turn a blind eye to multinationals bending legislation for profit, just as they did with the banks. Out-of-touch fools who indulge the rich bosses and patronize the workers. Then raise the issue of race. Is it any wonder, the contempt the average worker feels for these apologists for big business? [...] This is what makes those strikers so angry - a political class lecturing people who live where they don't. In the real world (Reade, 2009).

Reade demonstrates here how neoliberalism draws domestic and foreign workers into a cutthroat competition that only serves to drive standards down. This clearly undermines the work of trade unions, as highlighted above. This speaks to a major dilemma facing contemporary trade unionism.

Reade's arguments were taken up by his colleagues at the *Daily Mirror*, including Paul Routledge:

Whichever way you look at it, the outcome of the Lindsey oil refinery strike is a victory for work people and their unions. The walkout was unofficial, but union officials negotiated a landmark peace agreement enabling yesterday's return to work. British workers gained a hundred-plus jobs. Engineering employers are now committed to greater efforts to use our own skilled people. And the Government and Brussels bureaucrats are reviewing the European Directive on foreign labor that allowed this crisis. The Prime Minister condemned the protest strikes as counterproductive. If that's a defeat, let's have more of them, I call it a win. It's not often we have such good news, so let's celebrate it. Let's not forget the sacrifice of the lads in Lincolnshire and at other sites across the country who made it possible. Thanks, brothers. And there's more to come. It will give heart to British employees everywhere, confirming that repressive anti-union legislation cannot crush the aspirations of workers if they are resolute, united and have right on their side. This is also the first campaign of action mounted via the internet. It won't be the last (Routledge, 2009a).

It is unsurprising to see commentary that is strident in its support of the striking British workers when he take into the *Daily Mirror*'s working class readership. The newspaper must feature content that draws on the experience of the audience if it is to be successful.

### **Conclusion**

The Lindsey Oil Refinery strike brought to the forefront a variety of complex relationships. The stakeholders in this case included the trade unions and striking workers, the

Labour government, and the immigrant laborers brought to Britain by European Union free movement of labor laws. The *Daily Mirror*, which traditionally leans to the political left, took a strong pro-union/pro-worker stance, consistent with its coverage of previous strikes (see Chapters Six through Eight in this study), while taking a position that could be best characterized as ambivalent regarding the Labour government of Gordon Brown, and adopting a position that attacks free movement of labor laws where they disadvantage the British worker. The *Daily Mail*, on the other hand, did not adopt the kind of hostile tone it took in its coverage of the other strikes analyzed here, instead offering qualified praise for the workers but seeing the debate through the lens of immigration. However, the paper maintained its opposition to the Labour Party throughout, a longstanding editorial line. *The Sun*, on the other hand, offered the most criticism of the strike in its pages, while being relatively muted in terms of the overall breadth of its coverage, offering fewer articles overall. It is interesting, for example, to note that the strike only appears in *The Sun*'s news pages and does not receive comment from the newspapers' editorial column or op-ed columnists. This illuminates a lot about the news values (Gans, 1979) and politics of the three newspapers. None of the three newspapers made a firm argument in favor of free movement of labor. The Lindsey Oil Refinery strike was, broadly speaking, not constructed as an industrial dispute at all, but part of a broader immigration issue and a reflection of free movement of labor laws.

Responding to news of the strike, Gordon Brown was quoted by *The Sun* saying: "I understand people's worries about their jobs. But there's no solution in abandoning globalization" (Parker, Pascoe-Watson, & Lewis, 2009). This brings the discourse full circle to my earlier point regarding the emphasis on modernization. Brown spells it out, loud and clear for all to hear: There is no alternative to neoliberalism. The free movement of capital and labor,

privatization, weak trade unionism, and all the attendant ills of globalized capitalism cannot be shied away from. The next chapter summarizes the major findings of this study, discusses their significance, and offers directions for future study.



## CHAPTER TEN

### TABLOIDS AND TRADE UNIONS IN REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to understand how organized labor is represented in twenty-first century Britain in publications chiefly consumed by working class audiences: namely, tabloid newspapers. In doing so, I hoped to address *how* the working class was represented *to* the working class. That organized labor receives fair, full, and accurate coverage from the news media is a matter of significant importance to the health of the public sphere given its role as institutional advocates for the interests of the workforce against the interests of capital (Tilley, 1995; Western, 1997). The news media function to link the public to worlds beyond direct lived experience (Altschull, 1985; McNair, 2009; Richardson, 2007), and therefore perform a critical role in helping the public understand the complexities of the relationship between capital and labor, illuminating their understanding of particular disputes but also of the broader workings of capitalism.

Tabloid newspapers are overwhelmingly the newspapers of choice for the British working class and thus “the channel[s] through which the British working class find out what is going on in the world” (Beckett, 1977, p. 45). Lacking the political, economic, and cultural capital of more affluent members of society, working class citizens depend on fair, full, and accurate coverage from the media so that they may make informed decisions in the political and economic spheres. Conversely, trade unions depend on news media coverage for the representation of its agenda as advocates for the interests of the working class as a collective; indeed, this can sometimes be a critical component to the success or failure of trade union efforts (Jones, 1986; Manning, 1998, 1999). This is therefore an important topic of study from the

perspective of both the subject matter of media coverage and the audience receiving the media messages.

This study's importance is amplified by the historical epoch within which it is situated, a time when the free market possesses a stranglehold over most aspects of western culture (Giroux, 2005; Harvey, 2005; McChesney, 2004a). Trade unions are central to the advancement of social progress and defenders of the interests of the workforce against the ravages of the untrammelled free market (Rigby et al, 2006; Taylor, 2005; Wood, 2004). Understanding how the institutional agent of the working class is represented in the news media in this era is a worthy goal for it advances our understanding of the intersections of the media and political economy and how particular ideological perspectives regarding the economy, labor, and so on are privileged and others are marginalized.

Accordingly, this study examined coverage by the three newspapers with the highest circulation figures in the United Kingdom, all of which have readerships anchored in the working class (the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Mirror*, and *The Sun*) of four major strikes in the first decade of the twenty-first century: the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) strike of 2002-2003, the Communication Workers Union (CWU) strikes of 2007 and 2009, and the Lindsey Oil Refinery strike of 2009. A total of 744 articles – hard news reports, editorials, and op-eds – were analyzed. This study used critical discourse analysis as its method of choice, as this is an appropriate method to understand the linkages between discourse and ideology.

## **Findings**

The critical discourse analysis of 744 tabloid media texts yielded four key findings: First, that trade unions are depicted as out-of-sync in an era of modernization, a phrase that is

frequently demanded but rarely defined; Second, that tabloid media focused on the threat and inconvenience posed by striking trade unions; Third, that tabloid newspapers focused on the relationship between trade unions and the Labour Party (and Labour leaders in particular); and Fourth, that tabloid newspapers highlighted immigration as an issue that intersected with traditional industrial relations in complex ways. These findings are discussed in detail below. Due to the variation among the coverage offered by the three newspapers, I will, where relevant, offer a delineation of these differences, for to simply discuss “the tabloid media” throughout would miss important nuances that characterized each of the newspapers and distinguished them from one another.

### **Trade Unions and the Imperative to Modernize**

Modernization was a key element in the discourse. Trade unions were consistently constructed, particularly in the pages of *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail*, as out-of-step with the demands of a neoliberal society, which stresses flexibility, mobility, and lack of regulation. Their insistence on higher wages, improved benefits, and better working conditions for their members saw them constructed as otherworldly anachronisms, with terms used that often quite literally distinguished them as having values belonging to a different era (the 1940s or the 1970s, for example).

The use of the term “modernization” stemmed from official government discourse on the matter, where newspapers quoted senior Labour Party figures such as Tony Blair or John Prescott, who insisted upon the modernization of public services like the fire and postal services. Scholars have pointed to New Labour’s obsession with modernization as a cornerstone of its political lexicon, along with terms like “new,” “globalization,” and “knowledge economy,” all of which could be found on policy documents and briefing papers and regurgitated in the pages of

newspapers (Garrett, 2008, p. 279). Tony Blair, for example, defined modernization as “adapting to conditions that have objectively changed” (quoted in Callinicos, 2001, p. 9). This was in keeping with New Labour’s “third way” approach, which, as discussed in Chapter Four, was represented by its advocates as a non-ideological political formation that simply adapted center-left political theory to a terrain transformed by Thatcherism (see, e.g., Blair, 1997, 1998; Giddens, 1994, 1998, 2001). However, the third way’s critics have described it as little more than “an ideological shell for neoliberalism” (Anderson, 2000, p. 11; see also Hay, 1999; Heffernan, 2001; Howell, 2005; Palley, 2005). Modernization, when understood this way, can be seen as the willing acceptance of market values encroaching on the values of public services, with state intervention in the economy scaled back in favor of privatization or the contracting out of services and running services with a mind toward efficiency over universalism (Clarke, 2004).

The supremacy of modernization is writ large over the discourse studied here. If the journalists, editors, and columnists of *The Sun* or the *Daily Mail* were to be believed, trade unions representing a traditional public service ethos simply did not fit under an intensely market-driven ideological and material framework. Modernization was frequently demanded but rarely defined and thus became a reflexive hammer to attack the unions, presenting them as “dinosaurs” and relics of a bygone era. To modernize is to leave behind the gains that trade unions have made; to be modern is to adapt to the new society carved out by Thatcherism. For institutions like the fire and postal services, the public service model that has sustained them for many years was portrayed by the right-wing tabloids as no longer fit for purpose. Instead, the most “modern” and efficient service is the one that can be run at the lowest possible cost.

That modernization was adopted as a political keyword is perhaps unsurprising, given that it makes the things it is attached “sound exciting, progressive, and positive” (Finlayson,

2003, p. 67). After all, who would not want to be modern? To not be modern would mean one was stuck in the past, wedded to old habits and outmoded ways of doing things. Therefore modernization becomes commonsensical, part of the natural order of things. Throughout the discourse, journalists, editors, and commentators allied themselves with official government sources to insist that the trade unions and the services and workers they represented *must* modernize. Trade unions have often been “accused by their opponents of being unreasonable, unable to understand economics, and dinosaurs of the industrial past” (Serrano, Xhafa, & Fichter, 2011, p. xi). In their coverage of the strikes analyzed here, *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail*’s legions of commentators lined up to decry the workings of trade unions as old-fashioned, the practices they had instituted in the workplace as antiquated and inefficient, and their concern solely for their own self-interest rather than the public good. This is consistent with prior research, such as Beynon’s (2003) finding that trade unions in the Thatcher era were represented as “Jurassics” unwilling or unable to adapt to the new realities of market capitalism. Notably, the “dinosaur” motif returned in this discourse, the subtext being, of course, that just as the real-life Jurassic Age came to an end and its inhabitants wiped out, so the era of strong organized labor is at an end and its advocates must modernize or die.

This study finds support for Harvey’s (2005) thesis that neoliberalism has “become hegemonic as a mode of discourse” (p. 3) and adds to a rich body of scholarship that has examined how news media discourses naturalize the logic of neoliberalism (Fairclough, 1992, 2000a, 2002, 2003; Fenton, 2011; McKnight, 2003; Phelan, 2007a, 2007b). According to Fairclough (2001), ideology is “most effective when its workings are least visible” (p. 71). I contend that the rhetoric of modernization provides supple support for the workings of neoliberalism by masking its ideological underpinnings; instead, subservience to market

requirements is presented by the tabloid media – drawing on government rhetoric – as the maximal way to achieve efficiency, success, and public satisfaction. For Hallin (1987), “to say the media play a ‘hegemonic’ role is to say that they contribute to the maintenance of consent for a system of power” (p. 18). Neoliberalism’s power is writ large over the pages of tabloid newspapers, neutralizing dissent against the capitalist orthodoxy by marginalizing alternatives. While trade unions do not threaten to overturn the capitalist system (rather, they operate within it), they do present a framework of society built around cooperation, solidarity, and mutuality, terms that are oppositional to the neoliberal ideal of an atavistic society that exalts the individual and scorns the collective (Tilly, 1995; Western, 1997). In his discussion of how ideology manifests itself in the public domain, Hay (2001) pointed to how “the very parameters that previously circumscribed policy options are cast asunder and replaced, and the realm of politically possible, feasible and desirable is correspondingly reconfigured” (p. 197). The kind of society that trade unions represent was ruled out in the pages of *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail* as not being “politically possible, feasible, [or] desirable.”

One of the most troubling aspects of *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail*’s coverage was the marginalization of the perspective of firefighters and postal workers, which were presented as invalid and out of touch with the new economic realities. The atavistic logic of neoliberalism dictates that all must fall in line; it is the free market and not the worker that knows best. When it comes to an institution like the fire service, public safety is of paramount importance. However, the perspective of the workforce – i.e., those who actually put their lives on the line to protect the lives of others and their property – was discredited and marginalized. Instead, opinion columnists held court on what was the best way forward for the fire service and for public safety. The diminution of the worker’s perspective in any industry would be quite shameful; in this particular

industry it is nothing short of dangerous. The *Daily Mirror*, on the other hand, took a different approach to its right-wing counterparts, foregrounding the perspective of the workforce and taking a strongly pro-union line in its editorial content. It also regularly provided the perspectives of trade union representatives in addition to voices from the “shop floor.”

As I have discussed throughout this work, journalism consists of choices about what to cover and what not to cover, and how to cover it. This is, in short, the social constructionist view of journalism, which Garnham (1990) has described as the ability to determine “which meaning circulate and which do not” (p. 8). This grants journalists, editors, and commentators great power to open the doorway, so to speak, to particular ideological perspectives while closing the door to others. The newspapers studied here chose to represent these strikes in the manner they did, including whether or not to grant credence to the worker’s perspective, whether or not to challenge the Labour government’s insistence on modernization, and whether or not to grant space to union officials to rebut charges that the unions were obstacles to modernization. The analysis presented here provides evidence that a significant proportion of the British working class are consuming media that naturalizes the perspective of capital and marginalizes the perspective – quite literally so – of labor.

### **Greedy, Selfish, and Menacing**

The notion that trade unions pose a threat to the national good is well established in prior scholarship of news media coverage of organized labor (see, e.g., Beharrell & Philo, 1977; Blumler & Ewbank, 1970; Edwards, 1979; Glasgow University Media Group, 1976, 1980, 1982; Hartmann, 1976; Jones, 1986; McColl, 1980; Wade, 1985). The second major finding of this study is that this “classic” trope has not gone away, even as trade union membership and influence has diminished greatly since the 1980s. Trade unions are still able to irritate the

columnist, worry the editor, and cause the journalist to dust off references to the miners' strike, Arthur Scargill, Margaret Thatcher, and the "Winter of Discontent." Incendiary rhetoric was used by the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun* against striking workers to demonize them as threats to the national good, traitors to the cause in times of war, greedy and self-serving conmen looking to fleece the public purse, and so on.

The *Daily Mail* and *The Sun* consistently presented the striking workers in a negative fashion by emphasizing the impact of their actions on the public, often in exaggerated or even apocalyptic fashion. According to these newspapers, the striking firefighters were directly (and solely) responsible for the deaths of members of the public while they were on strike, playing into the hands of terrorists by stretching military and police to breaking points, and depriving the war effort in Iraq of badly needed soldiers. The striking postal workers, on the other hand, were guilty of ravaging small businesses, denying students their exam results, and depriving children of their advance copies of the newest Harry Potter novel. For both strikes, the specter of future strikes was raised, with *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail* almost falling over themselves with panic at the thought of further strikes. The result is that collective action becomes something to be avoided at all costs, in case it upsets "the well-functioning, democratic... consumer economy" (Martin, 2004, p. 10). Narratives of crisis are key to the maintenance of inequitable power relations, for "those who are able to define what the crisis is all about also hold the key to defining the appropriate strategies for [its] resolution" (Hart, 1993, p. 41). This places a lot of power and responsibility in the hands of the news media.

The actions of trade unions invariably affect the public, perhaps no more so than when they go on strike. Trade unions take strike action as a matter of last resort due to the loss of wages involved. However, one factor likely to be on striking workers minds is the effect the



strike will cause on the public, and how this will affect public perception of the strike, which can be critical to a strike's success (Jones, 1986; Manning, 1998, 1999). According to Martin (2004), contemporary labor coverage is structured around a "consumer frame" that sees all industrial action through the lens of the consumer. However, this is the result of a choice based on news values (Gans, 1979). While certainly it is reasonable to consider the strike through the lens of public-consumers it would be just as reasonable, surely, to consider the strike through the lens of public-workers? After all, do we not spend most of our weekdays at work? This is particularly true of waged labor, which does not have the flexible working hours that professions, academia, and financial services, for example, typically provide. Therefore, for newspapers serving working class audiences, it would be just as reasonable to consider the strike through its impact on workplace relations, the relationship between capital and labor (or management and workforce), and so on.

The difficulty with a public sector strike is that public sector services are just that – services, provided to members of the public so that they may depend on them. Furthermore, some public services are of greater magnitude than others. Consider the public sector strikes analyzed here, for example. While a postal strike may cause inconvenience and some mild distress through missed letters and packages, a strike by firefighters is of much greater magnitude as public safety may be imperiled. That said, it is important to keep in mind that an industrial dispute – like any other dispute – involves two parties. Again, we return to the matter of journalistic choices. It would be very easy to represent strikes as a failure on the part of two sides to reach a consensus. To assert that it is the fault of the workforce is, I would argue, lazy reporting, as this obscures the efforts made by the union to reach a settlement. It also has a sinister undertone, indicating that it is management that is always correct, while the workforce

should not question the settled consensus but instead fall in line. The reality of life in a capitalist system is that the relationship between capital and labor is innately tense because of differing objectives that align only out of necessity. Reporting that serves the public interest would acknowledge that there are two parties involved in an industrial dispute, and at a very minimum acknowledge that “blame” for the strike, if it should be cast at all, should be cast equally.

Prior scholarship has found that trade unions are consistently presented as “bad news” because they only ever appear on the news agenda during times of industrial dispute. This, critics argue, means that the positive work of trade unions in preventing strikes from occurring and the work they do to improve the conditions of the workforce on a daily basis goes largely unheralded (Bok & Dunlop, 1970; Goldman & Rajagopal, 1991; Griffiths, 1977; Puette, 1992; Tunstall, 1983). On the one hand, this is to be expected, given that the news media operate under a consensual view of society. Such a view means that a strike represents a point of strain in the social structure and is therefore worthy of coverage (Hartmann, 1976). Walsh (1988) quotes a Canadian labor reporter’s frustration with the charge that the news media ignore the good work of trade unions, claiming that “peace in the Middle East would be big headline news but a continuing state of peace could hardly be expected to make the news every day” (p. 208). However, as Morley (1976) has pointed out, the consensus view assumes there are no “irreconcilable structural conflicts of interest” (p. 250), which, as noted in Chapter One, is not the case in a capitalist state. Note that in the case of the Lindsey Oil Refinery, it is the strikes that capture news attention, not the mass sacking of the British workforce. Although the coverage veers in a different direction altogether because of the immigration issue, we should not neglect to note that it is still the withdrawal of labor that grabs headlines while the withdrawal of capital

passes without comment. The former is assumed to be outside the consensual view of society, the latter still operating within it, part of the “rough and tumble” of capitalism.

One of the major contributions of this study is to articulate the kind of divisive rhetoric used by tabloid newspapers that sought to divide the working class, whether it was workers against other workers or workers against their union leader. What this suggests is the need to diminish the union in the eyes of the reader, to help the reader understand that the striking workers “are not on your side.” If you are a nurse, they are earning more than you and need to be paid less. If you are a soldier, your leave has been cancelled as a result of their reckless strike action. If you work in the private sector, you have reason to be angry at the “gold-plated” pensions of postal workers that you are paying for while your pension is more meager by comparison. If you are a member of the public concerned with the war effort in Iraq, you have even greater cause for concern because striking firefighters have jeopardized the likelihood of success by requiring many soldiers to stay behind on fire duty. This is an important finding, for the success of trade unions depends on their ability to reflect the concerns of the workforce as a coherent class bloc (Western, 1997). In an age of declining membership, trade unions have a clear interest in appealing to potential members. Having the two newspapers with the largest readerships in the working class – not to mention in Britain overall – attacking the trade unions as selfish wreckers in their pages is clearly not helpful to labor’s cause.

That said, I would argue that the fact that trade unions are treated so viciously by the tabloid media is due to the challenge they pose to the settled economic consensus. One can easily fall into the trap of assuming that because trade unions have comparatively little influence and membership in the twenty-first century, they will be dismissed by a capitalist media system eager to maintain its hegemony. This has been demonstrated to be emphatically not the case. Trade

unions have the potential to agitate, even if it is on the margins, and the fact that they are treated so maliciously demonstrates the danger they pose. McChesney's (2004a) argument that "workplace conflicts are as important as ever" (p. 76) is therefore quite prescient in light of these findings.

### **New Labour and the Unions: An Unhappy Marriage?**

A third finding of this study is that tabloid newspapers focused on the relationship between the Labour Party and the trade unions and portrayed it as fractious. This study has provided insight into the kind of discourse used by the tabloid media in their coverage of this relationship and the discourse used by Blair and Brown themselves. Blair was depicted as the "heir to Thatcher" in his dealings with the FBU, indicative of the ideological travel the Labour Party has undergone to reposition itself as a party shorn of its former beliefs, values, and policies. The Blair-as-Thatcher motif represents, perhaps, the natural conclusion of this journey. That *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail* supported Blair in his efforts to defeat the FBU is more of a commentary on the ideological journey taken by New Labour than it is a reflection of any reversal in the position of the right-wing tabloid press from its hostility to the Labour Party in the 1980s (Curran, Gaber, & Petley, 2005; Heffernan & Marqusee, 1992; Seaton, 1982; Thomas, 2005; Tunney, 2004). Indeed, this study provides support for the assertion that New Labour was "every bit as hostile to the exercise of the right to strike as previous Conservative governments" (Howell, 2005, p. 186). Explicit parallels are drawn between Blair and Thatcher, the implication being that just as Thatcher faced down striking miners (and crippled trade unionism) so must Blair face down striking firefighters and finish the job off. For his part (through quotes of speeches he gave and from anonymous sources that were claimed to be close to him), Blair encouraged these parallels, making clear that New Labour would not act as any previous Labour

government had, and taking a clear stance against the union and in favor of the aforementioned “modernization.”

What is particularly interesting here is the approach of the *Daily Mirror*. While the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun* encourage Blair to teach the striking firefighters a lesson and portray him as the true heir to Thatcher, the *Mirror* also saw the Thatcher parallel but was aghast at it. Its editorial and commentators placed themselves firmly behind the striking firefighters and laid blame for deaths at Blair’s door due to his alleged intransigence in dealing with the union. For the *Mirror*, Blair represented a sell-out to the labor movement and a betrayal of traditional Labour Party values. Its commentators – chiefly Paul Routledge, Brian Reade, Charlie Whelan, and Tony Parsons – seemingly took turns to attack New Labour as an inauthentic “wolf in sheep’s clothing” and an aberrance in the history of the Labour Party. A true Labour Party, for the *Mirror*, would stand alongside striking trade unionists when they are under threat. However, Blair himself was the aggressor here, as the representation of the government. For the *Mirror*, this was a government that had “forgotten where it came from” – namely, the trade union movement. While the *Mirror* and its columnists held out hope that Gordon Brown’s leadership would reposition Labour back on the side of trade unionists and therefore cast Tony Blair’s period as leader as something of a misguided interregnum, they were to be proven unhappy as Brown refused to support the major strikes that occurred on his watch. Indeed, the paper openly criticizes Brown for his handling of the CWU strikes and the Lindsey Oil Refinery wildcat strikes, making it more critical of New Labour than its right-wing counterparts, which are critical of the unions involved but not the Labour Party’s handling of them.

By looking at the differences among the newspapers’ support (or lack thereof) of New Labour and the way it dealt with the strikes, we learn a lot of about their ideological inclinations

as well as New Labour's. Ultimately, we find that *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail* take a distinctly neoliberal line on trade unions and see the Labour Party as the vessel for their elimination, while the *Mirror* takes a strong pro-union line and sees the Labour Party as a "class traitor" for its support of neoliberal policies and lack of support for the trade unions. Given the above, it is not hard to disagree with the assertion that New Labour is best understood as a "consolidation of, rather than a radical departure from, Thatcherism" (Howell, 2005, p. 134).

### **Immigration Trumps Labor?**

The fourth major finding of this study came through its analysis of tabloid newspaper coverage of the Lindsey Oil Refinery strike and the "wildcat" strikes that followed it. It was clear that this coverage was quite unlike coverage of the other strikes inasmuch as labor was displaced as the concern of the coverage by immigration. This has much to do with the context of the particular dispute, which saw domestic workers displaced by European workers on cheaper contracts, taking advantage of European Union free movement of labor laws. However, it was interesting to see immigration completely displace the traditional themes of labor reportage established above. Wildcat strikes have been illegal in the United Kingdom since the Thatcher reforms of the 1980s. One would have expected to see commentary on this, but aside from one fleeting mention in an early report in *The Sun*, the legality of the strikes was absent from coverage. One may have expected to see the usual narrative of trade unions as threats to the national good, violence on the picket line, manipulative trade union leaders and their befuddled followers, or of trade unions as anachronistic dinosaurs unwilling or unable to adapt to a globalized economy. However, these tropes were notable by their absence. Instead, immigration became the "master narrative," displacing labor in the newsworthiness stakes. While, as noted above, it was the strikes that attracted media attention, that attention quickly shifted to the

broader issue of employment law under the European Union. This led to the curiosity of the *Daily Mail*, which had established firm anti-union credentials in its coverage of the other strikes analyzed here, supporting the striking workers. This suggests that the news values (Gans, 1979) of the tabloids deem immigration and Britain's membership of the European Union as the hook around which an anti-EU narrative can be built. The Lindsey Oil Refinery represented a rare instance where the coverage of the *Mail*, the *Mirror*, and *The Sun* were aligned in terms of their agreement with the strike. The *Daily Mirror* took a strong stance against the company that dismissed the British workers and castigated the Labour government of Gordon Brown for not supporting the striking workers, with Brown singled out for particular criticism because of his promise to deliver "British jobs for British workers," a promise he legally had no ability to fulfill given the constraints of EU employment law. This continued the theme developed previously in the *Mirror's* coverage and commentary – that New Labour, as led by Blair and subsequently Brown, cannot be relied upon to support striking workers in their hour of need.

Globalization has seen the power of the nation-state diminished, as governments find their policy options restricted by supra-national organizations and institutions like the European Union and the globalized marketplace. This is what Weiss (2003) has called "the erosion of national capitalisms" (p. 3). According to Weiss, neoliberalism has seen the state's role shrink further and further and cede control of the economy to the marketplace until it is limited to the basic function of providing security and the rule of law. For Harvey (2005), the neoliberal project has been to "disembed capital" from "a web of social and political constraints" (p. 11). A nation-state's control over its borders, ceded to the European Union, is one such example of this. In this discourse, we see two competing ideologies – nationalism and neoliberalism – in a state of dialectic tension, with the former stressing closure, fixity, and rigid definitions of self and nation,

and the latter emphasizing flexibility and a viscous conception of the nation and the borders that bind it. The intersectionality of these discourses as part of “the language [of] new capitalism” (Fairclough, 2002, p. 163).

The news media play a key role in the discursive construction of the nation and who does and does not belong (Anderson, 1983; Brookes, 1999; Flores, 2003). It has been said that the success of the European Union is predicated on how its members identify with it (Gavin, 2000), which in turn hinges on its representation (Cram, 2001; Hall, 2002). Britain has been said to be economically integrated into Europe but culturally distinct, a reflection of its historic ambivalence toward Europe (Ludlow, 2002; Miles & Doherty, 2005), a position that Hall (2002) has described as “*in* Europe but not *of* Europe” (p. 57, my emphasis). This historical ambivalence explains “why Britain has often reacted with uncertainty, perplexity, and even hostility to the ideas of European cooperation [that] have been advanced by its neighbors and hesitated profoundly about the extent to which it has wanted to be involved” (Ludlow, 2002, p. 106). Because of the material reality that allows capital and labor to move unimpeded throughout Europe, it is in the realm of discourse where notions of nation and belonging are mediated, hence maximizing the importance of newspapers (Golding & Bondebjerg, 2004; Ifversen, 2002).

Since the 1980s, the British tabloid press has consistently been opposed to Europe as a political project, emphasizing the distinction between Britain and her European neighbors even as economic and political integration pulled them ever closer together (Anderson & Weymouth, 1999; Brookes, 1999; Cole, 2001; Gavin, 2001; Hardt-Mautner, 1995; Kevin, 2003; Morgan, 1995; Wilkes & Wring, 1998). This has extended to coverage of European immigrants, which has been found to be overwhelmingly negative (Charteris-Black, 2006; Khosravini, 2009). Representations of immigrants in the media are central to the negotiation of belonging by



articulating “who now – and who in the future – will be permitted to be a ‘European’” (Schlesinger, 2006, p. 424). The media becomes a site of “struggles between inclusion and exclusion both within member states and at the borders of the E.U. itself” (p. 424). Anderson and Weymouth (1999) have described tabloid newspaper coverage of Europe and its attendant issues as “highly controversial, emotive, and often strongly xenophobic” (p. 61), the result of a deep imbalance in the political orientation of the collective British press, where right-wing, anti-European voices dominate. For Cole (2001), the anti-European press “is passionate in its beliefs” (p. 124). This would explain the discourse we see in tabloid media coverage of the Lindsey Oil Refinery strike, which saw immigration become the master narrative as a result of EU integration.

The problem with Europe is that it is an issue which cuts across and divides the political spectrum. The political right is divided between those that see the EU as a vehicle for the broadening of the free market and of neoliberal ideals of the free movement of both capital and labor and those who see the EU as an anti-democratic threat to British sovereignty. On the left, camps are drawn between an internationalist approach that sees the EU as a positive agent for change and the facilitator of a more cosmopolitan society and those who see it as the harbinger of neoliberalism and the erosion of labor rights embedded in the framework of the nation-state. The same divisions can be said of the British tabloid media, where the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun* sit in the right-wing, anti-Europe camp and the *Daily Mirror* sits in the left-wing, anti-Europe camp. Khosravini (2009) has argued that one typically would turn to the broadsheets for pro-European perspectives, such as *The Times* on the political right and *The Guardian* on the left. What this means is that the majority of the British working class consumes anti-Europe news, given that the three newspapers with the biggest sales in the C2 through E social grades (those

studied here) all have anti-European ideological outlooks, regardless of whether they lie on the political right or left when it comes to domestic issues.

However, we must remember the economic compulsion of the British press and how media outlets function in accordance with the audiences they serve. Given that the tabloid newspapers serve a working class audience, unless they “reach this audience, they will fail as businesses” (Sparks, 2006, p. 116). Therefore, the media “cannot simply reproduce the capitalists’ own view of the world” but must present that view “in a form that will be palatable to people whose entire life is spent in conditions of exploitation and oppression that are the direct result of capitalism” (p. 116). In order to accomplish this, the media must appeal to the fears and anxieties of the audience they are addressing. In this context, the media must reconcile the fears of their working class audiences grasping for stability in a globalized economy with the interests of capital that are inclined to favor neoliberal economics. Considered against this backdrop, it is perhaps unsurprising that immigration became the focus of the strike’s coverage.

That said, we would do well to remember that just because media coverage of Europe is negative does not necessarily make it unethical. While on the one hand xenophobic coverage of immigrants should be criticized, this should not be allowed to prohibit legitimate criticism from the press and other quarters of the free movement of labor that results in an economic race to the bottom. Gavin (2001) has criticized the findings of scholars like Anderson and Weymouth (1999), claiming they are “explicitly judgmental” in the sense that they are ideologically predisposed toward the European Union and therefore find anti-EU coverage flawed (p. 307). For Gavin, press criticism of the EU allows the airing of doubts about the viability of the EU project. A recent poll showed that almost 50% of British voters would support Britain’s withdrawal from the European Union, with some 70% of voters wanting the opportunity to have

the issue put to a national referendum (Clark, 2011). Indeed, polling data has shown that support for the EU has been consistently lower in Britain than any other country in the EU (European Commission, 2004).

What we can see from the Lindsey Oil Refinery case is that neoliberalism pits worker against worker in a race to the bottom, to see who can work for the lowest pay and with the lowest level of protections. How trade unions position themselves in light of these laws remains to be seen. The trade unions involved in the Lindsey Oil Refinery strike were at pains to insist that the strike was not an issue of race, but of class. Free movement of labor is naturally inimical to strong trade unionism. The goal for trade unions must surely be cooperation with sister unions in European countries to find ways to raise standards for all their members, to prevent the possibility of workers from one country “undercutting” workers from another.

### **Implications**

The relationship between capital and labor is the axis upon which social relations are constructed and trade unions are important intermediaries in this relationship. There are over seven million people in the United Kingdom who belong to a trade union, making them the country’s largest voluntary organization (Harman, 2008). Therefore how they are represented in the news media is a matter of concern to scholars. However, as discussed earlier, the British labor movement has long suffered from negative coverage from the press, with the most hostile coverage coming from the tabloid press that serves a working class audience. This can negate the good work that trade unions do for the advancement of worker’s economic position both in the workplace and at the level of society (Walsh, 1988). The result is the erasure or

misrepresentation of a “whole body of experience and ideas” within the public sphere (Rowbotham, 2001, p. 85; see also Baistow, 1985).

It would be very easy and tempting to take a marketplace approach and say that the public sphere is well-served by competing viewpoints within the tabloid press, with the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun* taking a right-wing view and the *Daily Mirror* opposing them on the left. Given that “democracy requires diversity and pluralism in the press” (Tunney, 2004, p. 3), could we not therefore point to this as an example of the marketplace in action, a classic Miltonian gambit of truth and falsity grappling? I regard this position as ethically untenable. For one, both the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun* outsell the *Mirror* (and every other British newspaper) by a very large margin. If truth is to overcome falsity in its grappling match, it is taking its time doing so. So, the marketplace analogy – which can only ever be a post-hoc assessment in any case – fails on its own terms. But there is something quite insidious about the casual acceptance of media consumers being allowed to be deceived in the name of a mythical marketplace of ideas. I contend that it is not enough to satisfy oneself that there are competing perspectives in the British tabloid press when close to five million readers – almost ten percent of the entire population – are being fed information that is sensationalistic, lacking in context, and often wildly inaccurate thanks to the “news” they are given in the pages of *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail*, particularly in light of evidence from other scholars of a knowledge gap between the information-rich and information-poor that closely follows class lines (Dahlgren, 1995; Franklin, 1997; McLachlan & Golding, 2000; Rooney, 2000).

Habermas (1989) posed his theory of the public sphere as a corrective to the above liberal marketplace model for the very reason that it considered the democratic health of the polity to be analogous with the simple existence of different perspectives. For Habermas, rational discourse

is a precondition to social progress. The kind of discourse witnessed in the *Daily Mail* and *The Sun* could certainly not be described as rational, with its panicked rhetoric about impending crisis and its exposés into the sexual conduct of trade union leaders. To the extent that the public sphere is dominated by these voices, democracy suffers and the hopes of a more progressive, egalitarian society are aborted. Scholars have argued that it is no surprise that journalism in western societies has become so commodified and commercialized at precisely the same time as capitalism has solidified its grip as the dominant economic model (Chalaby, 1998; Conboy, 2004; Garnham, 1990). I maintain, in accordance with other scholars (e.g., Campbell, 2005; Martin, 2004; Garnham, 1986, 1992; Sparks, 1999, 2006), that a press that serves the public interest cannot be achieved under a market-driven system. I maintain that it is the market-driven logic of contemporary journalism, characterized by “the ruthless logic of an economic system that demands ever-increasing profit margins resulting in fewer journalists doing more work, undermining the provision of news in the public interest” (Fenton, 2011, p. 65) that is at fault here, rather than problems with particular newspapers, journalists, editors, and commentators. Therefore, scholars must continue to examine alternative models of journalism that pursue the public interest rather than the bottom line.

In his discussion of Habermas’ theory of the public sphere, Garnham (1992) asked, “What new political institutions and new public sphere might be necessary for the democratic control of a global economy and polity?” (pp. 361-362). This is a question we should keep at the forefront of our minds. Murdock and Golding (1989) articulate what is necessary for the creation of a genuine public sphere:

First, people must have access to the information, advice, and analysis that will enable them to know what their rights are in other spheres and allow them to pursue their rights

effectively. Second, they must have access to the broadest possible range of information, interpretation, and debate on areas that involve political choices, and they must be able to use communication facilities in order to register criticism, mobilize opposition, and propose alternative courses of action. And third, they must be able to recognize themselves and their aspirations in the range of representations offered within the central communication sectors and be able to contribute to developing those representations (pp. 183-184).

I contend that these necessities are not fulfilled under a market system. In their present form, the tabloid newspapers are an impediment to the political development of the working class. While newspapers are not the only source of information available to audiences, they are still extremely popular among the working class, as their circulation figures attest to. Lacking the economic, social, and cultural capital of more affluent members of society, working class readers depend on tabloid media for information about the day's events in historical and political context.

Furthermore, they *deserve* such a media.

Scholars have long bemoaned the quality of the British tabloid press – indeed, concerns about the quality of newspapers go back to at least the nineteenth century (Altschull, 1985; Schudson, 1978). Contemporary scholars have argued that tabloid newspapers do not serve the needs of a democratic society and in fact undermine democracy because of the rampant misinformation and exaggeration that fills their pages. For Rooney (2000), “it is impossible to sustain an argument that [*The Sun* and the *Daily Mail*] are channels of rational discourse that allow private individuals to come together as a public body to form reason-based public opinion” (p. 92), while Gripsrud (2000) has argued that the tabloid newspapers are synonymous with “a lowering of journalistic standards that ultimately undermines the ideal functions of mass media

in liberal democracies” (p. 285). Earlier, I cited John Dewey’s argument that the sole reason for the press’ existence is to help democracy flourish. Therefore the press performs a vital role. It is clear from the discourse offered here and from prior scholarship that the British tabloid press is failing in this fiduciary role.

Richard Hoggart (1957) bemoaned the tabloid newspapers of his day, arguing that they did not advance the intellectual position of the working class. Hoggart was a working class academic who expressed concern at the distortions and distractions offered by the tabloid newspapers of the day, fearing “a democracy whose working people are exchanging their birthright for a mass of pin-ups” (p. 177). Hoggart stated that his “strongest objection” to these increasingly popular and powerful institutions “is not that they prevent their readers from becoming highbrow, but that they make it harder for people without an intellectual bent *to become wise in their own way*” (p. 276, my emphasis). Tabloid newspapers that do not provide a full account of industrial relations and resort to divisive rhetoric, *ad hominem* attacks, and the demonization of trade union leaders, do not advance the public interest one iota. They do not help working class audience “becomes wise in their own way” but berate and frighten them. We do not have to accept the “pessimistic” view of working class readers that *The Sun* offers (Cole & Harcup, 2010, p. 24), where the ethics and quality of the British press are subject to market values. Scholars like Hoggart and Dewey arm contemporary theorists with the vocabulary to tackle these fatalistic arguments directly.

Of course this study, like any text-based analysis, looks at the “implied audience” (Mander, 1999, p. 7). That is to say that tabloid newspaper readers are not passive dupes waiting to be filled with media messages that they will immediately and uncritically accept as a given but are active participants in the generation of meaning. Of course, no media scholar concerned with

textual representation can know for sure what the effects of the texts are on an audience.

However, to focus on this issue is to miss the point somewhat. While the possibility exists that audiences can contest and negotiate dominant ideological frameworks, their lack of economic, political, and cultural capital denies them ready access to alternative meaning systems that would better equip them with the tools to reject the definitions offered by the tabloid media.

Furthermore, shifting the focus away from the text to the audience allows for the evasion of discussion of media responsibilities altogether; if texts depend entirely on how they are received and used, why not allow anything and everything on newspaper pages and television screens and leave it to the consumer to decide for themselves? Ultimately, this feeds again into a market narrative. Scholars must be empowered to critique ideas that are dangerous to the health of a democracy. Earlier, I offered two simple questions from Stuart Hall (1973) that I argued should be at the forefront of media scholars' minds: "Can the media help us to understand... significant real events in the real world? Do the media clarify them or mystify us about them?" (pp. 90-91). I do not believe that the majority of the coverage of the strikes analyzed here helped readers "clarify" the complexities of industrial relations under capitalism, nor understand the specific issues pertinent to each of the strikes analyzed here.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Future scholarship should continue to examine how trade unions are represented in public life. Certainly, cross-national studies would be a welcome addition to the literature, particularly at a time when, at the time of this writing, austerity measures are being imposed that threaten people's livelihoods. Understanding how the representations presented here contrast with representations in other countries would be more than welcome. Scholars could also take a more



historical approach by selecting one particular newspaper and following its coverage of unions over many years to see if or how it changes. Scholars could also look at the contribution of broadsheet newspapers and how they contrast with the representations offered here. Political scientists and historians must continue to examine the trade union-Labour link because it teaches us a lot about political change in the United Kingdom. Scholars must continue to examine how class is articulated in the public domain the twenty-first century. By ignoring it, we feed into the neoliberal myth that class is “dead.” Finally, and perhaps most importantly, scholars should continue to investigate alternative media models to one rooted in the bottom line, for it is only by pushing for reform that we can have a media system that placed the public interest first.

### **Conclusion**

The fact that trade unions are taken seriously as a threat by the right-wing tabloid newspapers and embraced by the *Daily Mirror* as the authentic voice of the working class (contrasted with the inauthentic voice of New Labour), indicates that the ideas that trade unions stands for – solidarity, brother and sisterhood, and community – are fundamental challenges to an atomizing neoliberal consensus that emphasizes individualism, consumerism, and greed. Despite the tabloid rhetoric, there is an alternative to neoliberalism. It exists in the everyday conduct of trade unions and how they organize for social change. Trade unions are at the forefront of challenges to the economic consensus. They are “of vital importance both as agents for the broadening of democracy, and as potential representatives of both the factory floor and more marginalized groupings in society” (Wood, 2004, p. 397). The goal of critical discourse analysis is a public that is more attuned to the way that language can be used in the service of dominant interests. It is my hope that this study has demonstrated the kinds of language used to

prop up neoliberalism and provided space for a discussion of alternatives: alternative journalistic practices, alternative media models, alternative economic systems. Neoliberalism has demonstrated itself to be unsustainable. It has created a journalism that pursues the bottom line over the public interest. It has created a factional, oppositional public sphere where workers do not see themselves as bonded through reciprocal interests but divided through narrow, sectional ones. Most dangerously, it has created a society where the law of the market has corrupted all aspects of public life. That oppositional ideas are branded in such harsh, vociferous terms indicates that there is a space for these ideas and that trade unions are at the vanguard of the promotion of these ideas.

Despite the rhetoric of the right-wing tabloid press, trade unions still have a role to play in public life in the twenty-first century. In fact, their role is more important than ever. In a time where neoliberalism maintains its hegemony over the public sphere (Harvey, 2005) it is critical that trade unions play a role of articulating different and dissident ideas, not only fulfilling their prescriptive role of advocating for their members but in so doing, providing space for challenges to the settled view. In his history of the trade union movement, Wood (2004) writes that “the rise of unions within the advanced societies in most cases took place coterminously with the rise of the broadening of the mainstream democratic discourse” (p. 11). Wood further notes that it is no coincidence that the decline of labor power in the closing quarter of the twentieth century occurred at the same time as “the increasing power of large corporations, the weakening of the public sphere, and widening social inequality” (p. 12). Public life has been systematically corrupted over the past thirty years as the monster of the free market has been unleashed, with devastating effects on communities in the United Kingdom (and over the world). A strong trade

union movement is critical to the fight back against neoliberalism, and their efforts must be supported.

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