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## *Windsor Star Newspaper Coverage of a 2009 Municipal Worker Strike*

Despite claims of "objectivity" or at least "balance," Canadian corporate media coverage is blatantly biased against labour unions. This conclusion comes from years of observation and study, amounting to reams of research. Logically, one would not expect otherwise, as labour is a significant production cost, and given corporate profit expectations. Ownership consolidation has led to integrated media companies which are at least well-connected to, if not subsidiaries of, other corporations. Advertising dollars outweigh consumer media spending by a margin of 4:1 or more, and wield heavy influence. In Canada, free trade agreements, corporate globalization, the 2008 global financial crisis, and a minority Conservative federal government have all been used as clubs to further batter labour organizations. The current case study examines newspaper coverage of a strike by 1800 municipal workers in the labour town of Windsor Ontario, in 2009. Casual observation of the coverage indicated that it was quite anti-union. Will a detailed analysis support or refute this?

In spring 2009, two City of Windsor Ontario locals representing inside and outside city hall workers, members of the Canadian Union of Public Workers (CUPE), went on strike for 101 days. The primary issue was post-retirement medical benefits, which were to be withdrawn from new hires, creating two-tiers of employees. Thus, the strike was "a battle over the principle of intergenerational equality between workers," (Noonan, 2009)[1]. Windsor is the "automotive capital of Canada," and the famous historical site for the 99-day, 1945 Ford Motors strike which gave rise to the Rand formula. While in the 1970s *The Windsor Star* was a more progressive, independent newspaper, it has been run in recent decades by the Southam Corp. chain, which was purchased in the 1990s by financier Conrad Black, then from him by the Izzy Asper family at CanWest Global, in 2000. In 2010, a group of creditors led by *National Post* president Paul Godfrey purchased the chain, creating the Postmedia chain.

The current study is a preliminary report of the findings of our research. Our Critical Discourse Analysis study of a Canadian Newsstand computer population of about 480 CUPE-related *Windsor Star* articles, all of those published in 2009, found the themes below prioritized, to the detriment of the union's cause: (Proportion of all 295 articles, excluding letters, in brackets).

Derogatory Themes About Unions in Newspaper Articles:

- CUPE members are 'the other,' and at odds with the public, while management is 'us.' (36%)
- Negative Discourse: Unions as greedy, wasteful, self-destructive, violent, & militant. (81%)
- Positive Discourse About Management: Which is Fighting the Good Fight. (42%)
- Reasons Emphasized For Union Concessions: too much for too little. (30%)
- Management is willing to negotiate, while Union is stubborn and unwilling to negotiate. (20%)
- Important information favourable to Union buried at the 'back-of-the-bus.' (40%)
- Focus on the impact of strike on the public and local economy rather than strike issues. (40%)
- Focus on strikers' slogans and mundane points rather than strikers' principles. (10%)
- Private sector is good, efficient/Public sector is inefficient, wasteful, etc. (15%)
- Exaggeration of public reaction toward strike: vast majority said to oppose union (20%)
- Focus on CUPE and union members' mistakes, rather than strike issues (15%)

Negative discourse about unions, point two above, is the most prevalent theme. Some of the newspaper articles had as many as seven of the above themes. The overall average was 2.89 themes per article, with letters averaging 1.95 themes and other articles 3.48.

The "stance" taken by each news article or letter was also measured, on a 7-point Likert scale (item) ranging from 1 as hard-line anti-city administration, through a "neutral" point, to 7 as hard-line anti-union. The intercoder reliability coefficient between the latter two authors was 92% for themes, and 87% for stances, which is very good.[2]

The authors coded 480 articles into four types of categories: News, (46%), Editorials, (4%) Opinion Columns, (11%) and Letters to the Editor (39%). The letters were the "least" biased against unions, with 185 letters which were 63% anti-union, 9% neutral and 28% anti-administration (Table 1). The 219 news items coded were 76% anti-union, 15% neutral, and 10% anti-administration. The newspaper editorials were 90% anti-union, 5% neutral, and 5% somewhat anti-administration. The opinion columnists were 95% anti-union, 2% neutral, and 4% anti-administration. There was only one column run in the paper during the whole year which was moderately anti- city administration, and it was written by Sid Ryan, then the Ontario President of CUPE. Ryan argued that the strike

[1]Jeff Noonan, "Cyber-Scabbing? Lessons for labour from the Windsor CUPE strike," Rabble, July 10, 2009. http://rabble.ca/news/2009/07/cyber-scabbing-lessons-labour-windsor-cupe-strike

[2] We used the formula of Ole R. Holsti, *Content Analysis for the Social Sciences and Humanities.* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley. 1969.

conflict should be sent to arbitration, something that the *Windsor Star* and the city administration vehemently opposed.[3] In all of the articles, there were only two (both letters) which were hard line anti-administration. One of these, on September 17, 2009 stated, "Eddie Francis went to extreme lengths to put his name at the front of this summer's war on labour. He wanted to take credit for grinding the members of *CUPE* into capitulation on the issue of PRB's [Post Retirement Benefits] to further his own political career. His conduct during this dispute was unprecedented in the history of labour negotiations in this city."[4]

Of course, the letters, which were the least biased, were also the shortest articles, averaging 158 words, compared to 590 average words for news articles, 472 words for Editorials, and 757 average words for opinion columns.

Another important factor is the sources relied upon in articles. When we look at the use of sources, we coded up to 12 sources per article. The largest source was the local union leadership, which was quoted as a source in 35% of the news stories and columns. City management, including the mayor, was a source in 25% of articles. City Council members, excluding the mayor, were next, at 16%. Citizens were at 12% while 13% of sources were miscellaneous (such as someone at the provincial Ministry of the Environment being quoted about the garbage piles).

The following quotation from Star columnist Gord Henderson illustrates the way sources were often used. The CUPE union members sometimes used ill-advised tactics which backfired on them. One was to hold a peaceful demonstration at mayor Eddie Francis' house. *The Star* and mayor were appalled. Henderson wrote:

> "Little wonder Mayor Eddie Francis was incensed. It's one thing to be painted as Public Enemy No. 1, at least in CUPE's simple-minded take on this dispute. It's one thing to be harassed and vilified everywhere you go. That's all fair game. It's quite another to have your family targeted for the same kind of treatment. 'The signal it sends is that we know where you live. And now, thanks to the newspaper, the whole city knows where I live. And all it takes is one,' fumed Francis. 'Picket me. Call me names. Harass me all day long. But if you've got a beef, keep it with us, not with our families.' Francis told me he appreciated the fact that CUPE Local 82 president Jim Wood refused to condone those actions and said he wouldn't want his members 'bothering people at their houses.' Contrast that with the feeble response from CUPE Local 543 president Jean Fox, who dumped responsibility for this mess on her picket committee and claimed 'they made their point' and probably won't be going back. Point? What point? That they can make life miserable for pregnant women and tiny tots whenever they choose? Shameless." [5]

Here we see how Francis is quoted approvingly. He's protecting his family, a pregnant wife and young child. The columnist agrees with his position wholeheartedly. Next, Jim Wood, the local head of the outside workers on strike is quoted, using five words. He too is reported as not being in favour of his own union's actions. Next, Jean Fox, local head of the inside workers on strike is allowed a four-word quote, and then is slammed by the columnist. This illustrates that being a union source is not necessarily a good thing.

Another example comes from a front page news story by reporter Doug Schmidt, who wrote more strike articles than any other reporter. Here, we can see the emotional, angry reactions from local union leaders Jean Fox and Jim Wood.

> "Mayor Eddie Francis's bid Monday to do away with post-retirement benefits for politicians drew an angry response from union leaders representing striking city workers.
>
> 'I'm just outraged -- (Windsorites) should be livid, absolutely livid,' *CUPE* 543 president Jean Fox, representing inside workers, said after Francis sought a motion to get rid of post-retirement benefits for elected officials. The city's attempts to get rid of such benefits for future employees is what both sides claim is the sole intractable issue that is keeping the *strike* going.
>
> 'You're in the negotiating process and you bring this up here? I think it's unspeakable,' *CUPE* Local 82 president Jim Wood, representing outside workers, told the mayor and council."[6]

This union representation sharply contrasts with the apparently reasoned explanations emanating from Mayor Eddie Francis, in the same news story.

> "Francis later told reporters the idea to seek a repeal of the post-retirement benefits for elected officials, approved in a bylaw in 2003, came to him earlier that day. He said it was in response to *CUPE* advertisements and recent union leadership statements asking why such benefits are good for politicians but not for employees. 'We need to remove excuses on why we can't have a deal,' said Francis.... Francis told reporters that council's position remains firm on the 'threshold issue' of post-retirement benefits for new hires, an issue the employer says is a large and growing unfunded liability for future ratepayers that currently stands at close to $300 million for all city employees. Striking workers account for about 30 per cent of the pension liability."[7]

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[3] Sid Ryan, "CUPE: Arbitration Not a Four Letter Word," *The Windsor Star*, June 11, 2009, A8.
[4] Jody Percy, "Labour Council Has its Rights," *The Windsor Star*, September 17, 2009, pg. A.9. Letter.
[5] Gord Henderson, "Binding Arbitration Means Throwing in Towel," *The Windsor Star*, May 30, 2009, pg. A6.
[6] Doug Schmidt, "Motion to cut council benefits angers strikers," *The Windsor Star*, June 16, 2009, A1.
[7] Ibid.

**Conclusions**

The Windsor Star's editor addressed accusations of biased coverage by the Star, after the strike ended, in a column. Here, editor Marty Beneteau again lashed out at the union, and claimed that his paper's news reports were objective.

> "The union response [to public anger over the strike] was to slam *The Star*, which Ryan in a speech to union members called 'that rag of a newspaper.' His assertion that 'there's absolutely no impartiality whatsoever' failed to make the distinction between opinion writers and news reporters, people paid to check their points of view at the door. And in doing so he paddled his 1,800 members out on to an island."[8]

Beneteau's advice to the union? "Next time, try learning the difference between news and opinion. Treat journalists with some respect." This is an ironic stance for a man whose paper has been bashing unions and strikers! Beneteau appears to be aware of the fact that the editorials and opinion columns were heavily biased. Recall that there was only one pro-union column in a whole year! But he is oblivious to the bias in the news columns of his own paper, which were 76% anti-union. This is slightly more biased than the letters, but less biased than opinion columns and editorials.

The current study, like much of the academic literature, finds that news coverage was not objective, but rather it was heavily biased against the unions and the strike. News coverage was just *less* heavily biased than columnists and editorials in *The Star*.

Most observers would probably conclude that the CUPE workers "lost" the strike. In the end, they conceded their main strike issue to management: new hires would not receive post retirement benefits. The principle of intergenerational equality has been lost. At this writing in July 2010, about a year after the end of the strike, Windsor City Council has now voted to outsource city garbage and recycling collection to a private Toronto company, beginning late in 2010, or in January 2011. A City Administration report indicated that the city could save more than $1 million annually through this outsourcing. Most workers in these areas will bump into other positions, but some workers will be lost. The following week, City Council voted to privatize city parking enforcement. Earlier in 2010, City Council voted to completely disband its public child daycare centres, leaving child care to private companies, as of September 2010. After waiting for a very long time to announce, Mayor Eddie Francis indicated July 20, 2010 that he would run for re-election in November 2010, although he earlier stated he would not go beyond his current, second term. A local labour leader threatened to run against him, but then withdrew.

In the "labour city" of Windsor Ontario, the unions are fighting the power establishment, including the media. They are beleaguered by the financial recession, thrown out of work by free trade, and vilified in the local press. A conservative City Administration run by Mayor Eddie Francis, the lawyer son of a bakery owner, is openly privatizing and union busting, with the support of a majority of the City Council. In 2009, two locals of CUPE, the largest union in Canada, went head-to-head with the Mayor and—more importantly—The *Windsor Star*. The CUPE fight primarily was for the important principle of "intergenerational equality between workers," as professor Jeff Noonan put it. The union campaign made a few mistakes, which *The Star* pounced on, exaggerated, and repeated ad nauseam. These unionists went 101 days without pay, and many suffered greatly during the strike. Their story has not been told. Their side has had no hearing. Perhaps, like the people of Cochabamba Brazil, Venezuela, or Cuba, they will take to the streets and ultimately win their victory.

Table 1
Stance By Story Type

| Stance | News (N) | % | WC (X) | Editorial (N) | % | WC (X) | Columns (N) | % | WC (C) | Letter (N) | % | WC (X) | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Hard Anti-Admin | 0 | 0% | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0% | 0.0 | 1 | 2% | 788 | 22 | 12% | 193 | 23 |
| Anti Admin | 6 | 4% | 648 | 0 | 0.0% | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0% | 0.0 | 15 | 8% | 157 | 21 |
| Some Anti-Admin | 13 | 6% | 659 | 1 | 5% | 339 | 1 | 2% | 755 | 15 | 8% | 168 | 30 |
| Neutral | 33 | 15% | 364 | 1 | 5% | 551 | 1 | 2% | 430 | 17 | 9% | 126 | 52 |
| Some Anti-Union | 73 | 33% | 569 | 5 | 24% | 318 | 5 | 9% | 817 | 9 | 5% | 154 | 92 |
| Anti Union | 79 | 36% | 686 | 3 | 14% | 372 | 7 | 13% | 726 | 20 | 11% | 177 | 109 |
| Hard Anti-Union | 15 | 7% | 609 | 11 | 52% | 573 | 40 | 73% | 762 | 87 | 47% | 150 | 153 |
| Total | 219 | 46% | 590 | 21 | 4% | 472 | 55 | 11% | 757 | 185 | 39% | 158 | 480 |
| Mean Stance | | 5.15 | | 6.05 | | | | 6.45 | | | 5.06 | | 5.3 |

*WC = Average word count in Articles*

[8] Marty Beneteau [editor] "CUPE's Jumbled Message," *The Windsor Star*, July 29, 2009 pg. A6.