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The polyphonic critique of trade unions: unpacking the logics of union critical discourse

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ABSTRACT

Trade unions have been the object of sustained critique coming from across the political spectrum for several decades now. Based on a discourse theoretical analysis of articles in three Dutch-speaking Belgian newspapers, published in two periods of social protest in 2014 and 2016, this article identifies six strands of critique: (1) critiques that label unions as conservative anachronisms that are out of sync with the realities of our times; (2) critiques that psychologize unions as egoistic, irresponsible and child-like actors; (3) critiques that criminalize unions as vandals, hostage takers or terrorists; (4) critiques that oppose unions to a homogenized general interest; (5) metadiscursive critiques of unions' discursive practices; and (6) metapolitical critiques that problematize unions as polarizing and 'political' actors. These six strands of critique get articulated through discursive logics that operate within and across texts, newspapers and voices. Together they constitute a heterogenous but relatively consonant polyphonic discourse that challenges trade unions and their right to strike. This discourse has metapolitical implications for the debate on the mode(s) of politics that can legitimately be practiced by civil society actors.

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Introduction

Trade unions across the western world have experienced a loss of power and influence over the past decades due to the effects of neoliberal economic globalization (Dencik & Wilkin, 2015). Belgium has not been completely immune to this global trend but in contrast to unions elsewhere, Belgian unions continue to be politically significant. At the same time, the legitimacy of the power of Belgian trade unions is challenged by many political parties, employers' organizations, journalists and citizens across the political spectrum.

As yet no discourse studies on anti-trade union discourse in Belgium have been undertaken. Internationally, there is a considerable body of work on neoliberalism, Thatcherism and other discourses relevant for understanding critique aimed at trade unions. However, discourse studies that focus specifically on unions and their critics remain scarce

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everywhere. The British case – especially the clash between Thatcher and the unions and New Labour’s relation to the unions – seems to have gotten most systematic attention (Ortu, 2008, 2009, 2014; Reicher & Hopkins, 1996). Media studies on the coverage of strikes and trade unions do exist but are not informed by the perspectives and analytical procedures found in the field of critical discourse studies (e.g. Beharrell & Philo, 1977; Martin & Oshagan, 1997; Philo, 1995; Puette, 1992).

In this article we focus on the voices of actors who criticize and delegitimize trade unions in Flemish (Belgian) newspapers. Our goal is to discuss the discursive logics that inform different strands of critique. For instance, within a neoliberal logic, trade unions and their members are often constructed as signifying all that is wrong with the welfare state. Unions and their workers are seen as barriers to the principles of ‘initiative, innovation [and] creativity’ and free market principles in general (Du Gay, 1996, p. 71 cited in Phelan & Salter, 2019, p. 30332). We recognize that much union critical discourse is informed by and/or reinforces this logic without assuming that all forms of critique are necessarily neoliberal *a priori*. It is important not to reify neoliberalism into a monolith and to recognize its variations, impurities and modulations. We therefore take into account how neoliberalism is articulated with other logics and ideologies (Peck, 2010; Phelan & Salter, 2019, p. 156).

We identified six different strands of union critical statements. These strands of critique can be enunciated in isolation but may also co-occur in a single text. Isolated union critical statements are not necessarily informed by a neoliberal ideology. It is perfectly possible to give voice to feelings of irritation caused by traffic jams or strikes while being opposed to neoliberal politics. At the level of newspaper discourse we may nevertheless end up with a polyphonic discourse constituted by heterogeneous critiques that get articulated intertextually and interdiscursively into a relatively coherent union critical sound. We will show that this polyphonic discourse generally favours neoliberal policy reforms and undermines the traditional role of trade unions in Belgium.

We focus on two periods of intense social conflict under the first government of Belgian PM Louis Michel (2014–2018). His centre-right government consisted of three Flemish parties – the nationalist Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie (N-VA), the Christian-democratic Christen Democratisch & Vlaams (CD&V), and the liberal Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten (OpenVLD), as well as one francophone party, the liberal Mouvement Réformateur (MR). Trade unions challenged the socio-economic policies of this government from its formation, and were immediately met with fierce criticism from governing parties and other actors defending budget cuts and labour market reforms. Previous governments also clashed regularly with unions but did not problematize the strategies that constitute the backbone of union power to the same extent (Brepoels, 2016, pp. 576–583; Schamp, 2012, p. 52).

The article starts with a brief contextualization of Belgian unions. We then move on to a discussion of the discourse theoretical concept of logics (Glynos & Howarth, 2007). We identify six strands of critique that structure much union critical discourse in Flemish newspapers on the basis of a discourse theoretical analysis (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007) and discuss the logics informing them. We conclude by reflecting on the way these critiques come together in a polyphonic but coherent critique that has metapolitical implications for the role of trade unions in democratic societies.

Trade unions in Belgium

Despite having suffered some loss of power due to neoliberal policies like many other unions across the world, (Dencik & Wilkin, 2015, p. 13), Belgian unions remain relatively strong (Schamp, 2012; Swyngedouw et al., 2016). Belgium is one of the few countries where more than half of all wage workers are union members. Vandaele even calls Belgium home to the *Homo Syndicus* (Vandaele, 2004). The strength of Belgian unions is 'reflected in their role in the process of 'concertation' or social and economic partnership, a partnership that in turn reinforces the position of the unions' (Blackburn, 2016, p. 41). Belgium can be described as a prime example of democratic corporatism (Schamp, 2012, p. 33). Unions take part in processes of social concertation at the company, sectoral, intersectoral, sub-regional, regional, federal and European levels.

Belgium has a tradition of syndical pluralism, with trade unions organized along a political-ideological 'pillarized' structure. The three biggest unions are the christian democratic CSC/ACV (Confédérations des Syndicats Chrétiens/Algemeen Christelijk Vakverbond) with 1,7 million members; the socialist FGVB/ABVV (Fédération General du Travail de Belgique/Algemeen Belgisch Vakverbond) with 1,5 million members; and the liberal CGSLB/ACLVB (Centre Général des Syndicats Libéraux de Belgique/Algemene Centrale der Liberale Vakbonden) with 290 000 members (Blackburn, 2016, p. 41). These unions have both a French-speaking and a Flemish Dutch-speaking wing.

The three most important unions have privileged historical links with political parties of the same ideological 'pillar'. However, since the 1980s, union positions have tended to gravitate towards each other and away from their historical party political allies (Brepoels, 2016, p. 621). Ideological motives have become less determining than instrumental motives (e.g. the quality of the services offered), for choosing a particular union (Blackburn, 2016, pp. 51–52; Schamp, 2012).

Nevertheless, Belgian unions have been on the defensive for some years now. In the face of a gradual weakening of the welfare state they have tried to defend established social rights by resisting socio-economic reforms. Unions spend a lot of energy defending themselves against attempts to curb their power. Attempts are made to limit the right to strike in public services and to change the role of trade unions in the welfare state by no longer allowing them to act as distributors of unemployment benefits (Devos & Humblet, 2007). The steady stream of critique aimed at trade unions has to be understood in the light of attempts to push socio-economic austerity measures that triggered massive union protest (Hay, 1996).

A discourse theoretical analysis of editorials and op-eds in the Flemish press

We present a discourse theoretical analysis of criticism aimed at trade unions in the Flemish quality press during two periods of intense social conflict. Our analysis relies on Essex style discourse theoretical analysis (Carpentier & De Cleen, 2007), a polyphonic approach to discourse (Angermüller, 2014) and coding procedures inspired by constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). This combination of approaches places us squarely in the field of critical discourse studies, understood as the field of inquiry that emerges out of the convergence of discourse theoretical and discourse analytical approaches

(Angermuller et al., 2014). The goal is to identify the strands of critique aimed at unions as well as the logics that allow for their articulation into a relatively consonant polyphonic discourse. We focus exclusively on union critical voices even though pro-union discourse also merits further analysis.

Essex style discourse theory offers a poststructuralist and post-Marxist framework for analysing the way actors articulate demands into more or less coherent political projects for achieving hegemony (Glynos & Howarth, 2007; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). The Essex concept of logic (Glynos & Howarth, 2007) allows us to explore on what bases critiques of unions were formulated. It also allows us to understand how critics dissociate the demands of trade unions from those of 'average' citizens. The notion of logic allows us to explain how critics constitute the political field as well as the entities and processes that constitute it.

Logics are 'constructed and named by the analyst' in order to identify and understand the 'rules or grammar of [a] practice' under study' (Glynos, 2008; Glynos & Howarth, 2007, p. 136). Political logics of equivalence and difference can be identified to explain the discursive constitution, institutionalization and transformation of norms, values, practices, identities and policies. Discourse theorists analyse the 'construction, defence and naturalization of new frontiers' as well as processes of dislocation and change. In addition to the formal logics of equivalence and difference that structure all things political (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) one can also identify specific neoliberal (Phelan & Salter, 2019), nationalist or populist (e.g. De Cleen & Stavrakakis, 2017) logics that break up or draw new frontiers (Glynos, 2008, p. 278).

The notion of *fantasmatic* logic allows us to explore the affective dimension of social and political reality. It helps us to understand how specific discourses 'grip' subjects through desire, enjoyment or disgust (Glynos, 2008; Glynos & Howarth, 2007; Stavrakakis, 2007; Zienkowski, 2017). This is useful for explaining the emotional and affective dimensions of the debate on strikes and union politics. In discourse theory, fantasy is understood as follows:

'... first, it has a narrative structure which features, among other things, an ideal and an obstacle for its realisation, and which may take a beatific or horrific form; second, it has an inherently transgressive aspect vis-à-vis officially affirmed ideals; and third, it purports to offer a foundational guarantee of sorts, in the sense that it offers the subject a degree of protection from the anxiety associated with a direct confrontation with the radical contingency of social relations' (Glynos, 2008, p. 278)

The notion of *fantasmatic* logic draws our attention to the way unions are construed as obstacles for a healthy economy and to the way the economy is constructed as a reified entity with an agency and logic of its own (see Phelan & Salter, 2019).

Our corpus consists of editorials and opinion articles published in the Flemish quality press published during the so-called 'hot fall' of November and December 2014, and during the months May and June in 2016. A large number of strikes and demonstrations in protest of the government's austerity policies took place in both periods. Our corpus contains articles from a business broadsheet (De Tijd, DT), a centre right broadsheet (De Standaard, DS) and a centre left broadsheet (De Morgen, DM). Using the GoPress database we collected all articles containing one or more of the following keywords: *staking*, *stakingen*, *werkonderbreking*, *stiptheidsactie* or *stiptheidsacties* (i.e. *strike*, *strikes*, *work interruption*,

punctuality action or punctuality actions). After a manual filtering of irrelevant articles, the remaining articles were categorized according to genre, newspaper, and date of publication with the help of the online CAQDAS tool Dedoose. The analysis presented below is based on 58 editorials and 54 opinion articles. We also relied on seven additional texts published in sources that provided essential context for interpreting the debate under examination.

In line with both constructivist grounded theory and discourse theory, we understand coding as a practice whereby researchers recontextualize voices and statements produced elsewhere into new configurations (Zienkowski, 2017, pp. 274–278). As such, codes bring together ‘ideas, thoughts and definitions in data, along with passages of text’ (Gibbs, 2007, p. 31) with the researcher’s sensitizing concepts (see Charmaz, 2006), research questions and sensibilities.

In a first phase, we followed a bottom-up coding process that closely resembles the process of *in vivo* coding common in traditional and constructivist perspectives to grounded theory (Saldaña, 2013, pp. 91–96). *In vivo* descriptive codes were used in order to identify voices and critiques at a low level of abstraction. In a second phase, we identified different strands of critique by grouping our *in vivo* codes into a series of axial codes. These axial codes formed the basis for our identification of the six strands of critique discussed and exemplified below. In a third stage we identified the logics that allow for the articulation of these different strands of critique into a polyphonic discourse with some degree of coherence. We analysed the political economic fantasies informing union critical statements, as well as the concept(s) of politics involved in order to understand the metapolitical dimension of this debate (Zienkowski, 2019, pp. 138–140).

Unpacking critique of trade unions in Flanders

In 2014 and in 2016 anti-trade union discourse peaked in response to a series of strikes and other forms of union protest. The (centre-) right-wing government parties against whom the unions were protesting were not the only ones criticizing trade unions. Among the critics we also find representatives of employers’ associations, journalists, public intellectuals, as well as radical right and social democratic politicians from the opposition. The six strands of critique rely on binary oppositions identified in the table below (Table 1).

For purposes of illustration we will discuss each strand of critique separately, but it is important to note that they are frequently articulated together in a variety of combinations. For instance, three stands of critique are articulated together in the excerpt below:

On the 24th day of their strike, the francophone wardens have landed in a universe where reason does not seem to have a hold on them anymore. This is not a social conflict that plays out according to a familiar scenario. Neither is it a strategically guided political strike. With every day that passes it becomes increasingly clear that this is an act of desperation. The strikers are cramped up. They want to go back to 2014. Back to the past. And for this pointless desire they risk all. They abandon the prisoners whom they are supposed to provide with a minimal amount of care for almost a month in the most scandalous of ways. This is a dramatic case of convulsing syndicalism. It does not have a project other than to keep things as they are. Not that things used to be good, but it was better than today. (Verhoeven 19/05/2016)

Table 1. Binary oppositions constructed in union critical discourse.

1) Unions as conservative and unrealistic anachronisms	
unrealistic, conservative, old-fashioned anachronistic unions	reforms as realistic, modern, future-oriented, necessary, inevitable
2) Psychologization of labour unions	
emotional, unreasonable, child-like unions	rational, reasonable actors and policy
3) Criminalization of labour unions	
hostage takers, blackmailers, criminals, terrorists	law and order; defence of social order; citizens and companies as victims, hostages
4) Opposing labour unions to the general interest	
<i>Unions blocking economic growth and job creation</i>	
unions as obstacles to job creation, economic growth, prosperity, group egoism	job creation, economic growth, prosperity, the right to work, the general interest
<i>Ordinary people as victims of nuisance caused by unions</i>	
unions responsible for annoying innocent citizens and public opinion at large	ordinary citizens as victims of nuisance caused by strikes and other outdated union tactics, union critics as defenders of ordinary citizens
<i>Reararticulating the debate as an intergenerational conflict</i>	
unions as endangering the jobs and prosperity of new and future generations of workers	intergenerational solidarity and sacrifice, young people and future generations depend on reforms
<i>Reararticulating the debate as an ethno-linguistic conflict</i>	
Flemish unions as left-wing and francophone unions as radically left wing under influence of socialist and Marxist parties.	Flemish public opinion as right-wing and critical of union actions
5) Metadiscursive critiques of union communication	
unions shout, use misleading and ineffective communication, meaningless slogans, half-truths, lies, demagoguery	inspired, creative, truthful, and/or rational communication and dialogue
6) Metapolitical critiques of unions as polarising and political	
unions as conflict-oriented, polarizing, radical, and 'political'	democracy as consensus, debate and 'the primacy of (party) politics'

Firstly, there is a characterization of unions as conservative anachronisms: 'They want to back to 2014. Back to the past'; 'keep things as they are'. Secondly, strikers get psychologized as unreasonable and emotional actors: 'reason does not seem to have a hold on them anymore'. There is no 'strategically guided political strike', their actions are a matter of an irrational 'convulsing syndicalism', and – in a wording that involves psychologization and an accusation of conservatism – they are 'cramped up'. Thirdly, the author frames the strike ethno-linguistically by referring to the 'francophone' identity of the wardens.

Articulations of multiple strands of critique in a single text are very common. Even though we will deal with each strand of critique separately, we will regularly reflect on the way they relate to each other. In doing so, special attention will be devoted to the logics that structure union critical statements into a polyphonic discourse with a relatively high degree of coherence.

Unions as unrealistic and conservative anachronisms

In line with the well-known 'There is no Alternative' trope, critics of trade unions frequently oppose 'realistic' austerity measures and right-wing labour policies to 'unrealistic' union views. This binary opposition structures the discourse of a wide range of actors including politicians, employers' organizations, commentators and journalists. Austerity and right-wing labour policies are presented as 'realistic', 'necessary', 'logical' and 'unavoidable',

and the political-ideological nature of such policy options is hidden from view. Simultaneously, union views are dismissed as ‘ideological’, ‘unrealistic’ or ‘naïve’, and these ‘unrealistic’ views are also presented as dangerous (see Sean Phelan, 2014, pp. 87–112).

Time plays an important role in the construction of this opposition between realistic/unavoidable right-wing policy actors and unrealistic/ideological trade unions. On the one side, there are ‘realistic’, ‘modern’, ‘forward-looking’ pro-reform forces. On the other side there are ‘unrealistic’, ‘conservative’ unions and left-wing actors that defend acquired rights. The latter are out of touch with reality and stand in the way of the necessary and unavoidable reforms. Unions are problematized as conservative forces and strikes are criticized as ‘old-fashioned’ (e.g. Mooijman, 2016; Snoeck, 2014) political tools that belong to the ‘previous century’ (Tegenbos, 2014). Reminiscent of Tony Blair’s Third Way discourse, strikers are dismissed as ‘nostalgic’ actors (see Ortu, 2008, pp. 298–299). Critics sometimes recognize the historical role of unions in raising working class living standards in Belgium only to claim that union tactics and priorities have now become relics of the past. Some claim that unions are no longer necessary at all. Trade unions, it is argued, are ‘stuck’ in a twentieth or even nineteenth century mentality (Mooijman, 2014).

Neoliberal reforms are presented as the only way to safeguard the present and future prosperity of Flanders and Belgium. Unions do not ‘realize’ that lowering wages, working longer, and other right-wing socio-economic measures are necessary ‘adaptations’ to a new economic ‘reality’ (Albers, 2014b). The ‘conservative’ unions become fantasmatic obstacles that need to be overcome in order to reach the mythical and beatific ideal of a smoothly functioning economy. The associated horrific image that comes with this political fantasy pictures Belgium as a ‘state in decline’ (Van Wesenbeeck, 2014) or even as a ‘failed state’ (e.g. Haeck & Mangelinckx, 2016). According to this discourse, progress is not realized through syndicalism but through entrepreneurship. One critic has the following piece of advice for Belgian trade unions: ‘try to be a bit of an entrepreneur and create the future for your members by yourselves, just as we, entrepreneurs do this for ourselves and for our colleagues (Van Wesenbeeck, 2014).

Psychologization of trade unions

A second strategy revolves entirely around the attribution of negative psychological properties to unions and their members. The unions are accused of stubbornness, short-sightedness, unreasonableness, irresponsibility, emotional and infantile behaviour. This opposition between emotional and/or irrational unions and those who favour rational neoliberal policies connects well with the critique of unions as unrealistic/anachronistic actors discussed above.

Strikers are typically de-legitimized as ‘unreasonable’ actors. Unions rely on ‘irrational’ tactics informed by emotion rather than by a realistic assessment of political and economic realities. This negative psychologization was used frequently in the discourse about striking wardens in 2016. Andreas Tirez of the liberal think tank *Liberales* wrote that it was unclear to him whether this strike was ‘justified or not’, but that it was abundantly clear that ‘a number of demands did miss reasonable ground’ (Tirez, 2016).

The unreasonable stubbornness of a childlike union is opposed to both the general interest and to a mature and rational socio-economic policy. The leader of the Flemish liberal party *Open VLD* claims that the critiques of unions amount to nothing more

than 'shouting, exaggerating, or making trouble' (Rutten in Reynebeau, 2014). The delegitimation of unions through psychologization in the form of infantilization often comes with a rather patronizing tone. For instance, in the wake of media coverage about the destruction of property by unionized protesters, the editor of the economics section of *De Standaard* wrote a mission statement for the type of trade union he would like to see in the future. Its mission statement would include statements of the following type: 'the union communicates in a civilized, adult way and expects the same from its members' (Mooijman, 2016). Commenting on the unions, the CEO of marketing company MasterMail remarked that she was looking at a 'carousel, without the children' (Wesenbeeck, 2014).

Criminalization of trade unions

A third strategy for criticizing, and in this case truly delegitimizing and marginalizing unions as legitimate political actors, involves criminalization. This type of critique often occurs when union actions can be linked to property destruction or to clashes with security forces. However, criminalization also happens in order to delegitimize legal modes of activism such as strikes and protests. Criminalization is a central element of the protest paradigm, i.e. '*a pattern of news coverage that expresses disapproval towards protests and dissent*' (Harlow & Johnson, 2011; Lee, 2014; Mcleod & Hertog, 1998):

The protest paradigm refers to a pattern of coverage that focuses on the violent and disruptive aspects of the protest actions, describes protests using the script of crime news, highlights the protesters' (strange) appearance and/or ignorance, portrays protests as ineffective, focuses on the theatrical aspects of the protests and neglects the substantive issues, invokes public opinion against the protesters, and privileges sources from or supporting the government (Mcleod & Hertog, 1998 in Lee, 2014, p. 2727)

Newspaper coverage of strikes in Belgium cannot be reduced to the protest paradigm alone but much union critical discourse followed this pattern. In the wake of a massive national demonstration against the government's austerity policies in 2014, several vehicles were destroyed and about sixty people got injured. Some members of the harbour and metal unions clashed with the police. In the debates following these events, union-critical voices and media coverage partially succeeded in diverting attention from the social demands of 150 000 protesters by accusing the unions of being unable to control their members. The discourse of the protest paradigm potentially contributes to a de-identification of citizens with unions.

To the extent that journalists expressed awareness of this type of media bias, most tended to problematize the coverage of protests by competing media. Some journalists regarded the excessive media attention for violence as inevitable, logical or natural, even if they deplored the political impact of mediatized representations of violence. One newspaper editor lamented that '*the extensive images of violence [in the media] provide opponents [...] with an opportunity to dismiss the unions as irresponsible*' (Eeckhout, 2014). Another journalist pointed out that the image of the '*hot fall*' would forever be associated with these riots (D'Hoore, 2014).

Critics frequently problematize the nuisance (see further) caused by strikes by drawing on the register of criminalization. They frequently accuse unions organizing public

transport strikes of *'taking travellers hostage all across the country'* (Albers, 2014a). The trope of unions 'kidnapping' the country or taking citizens 'hostage' is widespread. During the 2016 warden's strike a journalist of *De Morgen* commented that the wardens came across as a *'tough and ruthless gang'* because their actions led to inhumane living conditions for the prisoners (Muylaert, 2016). Strikes were also discussed in terms of 'blackmailing'. A Flemish nationalist political scientist spoke of *'the blackmail of [the government by] political strikes and street violence'* (Maddens, 2014). Moreover, in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 2016 in Brussels, the chairman of UNIZO (English: Union of Independent Entrepreneurs) described strikes as *'practices used by terrorists'* (Belga, 2016). In response to the controversy triggered by this statement, he apologized only to reframe the strikes as *'hostage situations'* instead (Van Eetvelt in BO, 2016).

Opposing unions to the general interest

A fourth strand of delegitimization strategies opposes unions against the general interest. This delegitimization strategy chimes well with the strategies of psychologization and criminalization. Like children and criminals, unions are portrayed as selfish actors who are unable to see beyond their immediate self-interests. They are accused of defending their interests and/or the interests of their members at the expense of the population and/or the economy at large.

Strikers are often asked to show more 'solidarity' with the rest of society. Unions are asked to contribute rather than to sabotage the economy (Ortu, 2008, pp. 295–297). By opposing unions to a flourishing economy, a healthy society, a general interest and/or the nation as an organic whole, critics undermine the very notion of class conflict. The problem is that such calls miss the point that *'an institution which collects individual wills and represents the majority of votes, that has as its primary goal the training of workers and that cooperates with the government in order to compete in the world market is simply not a Trade Union (at least not by ILO [International Labour Organization] standards)'* (Ortu, 2009, p. 174).

We identified four sub-strategies through which unions are opposed to the general interest: (a) depicting unions as a danger to economic growth and job creation; (b) a focus on the nuisance created by the unions for the majority of (working) people; (c) a rearticulation of the debate as an inter-generational conflict; and (d) a rearticulation of the debate along nationalist and/or culturalist lines.

Unions blocking economic growth and job creation

Unions and the *general interest* are often opposed by presenting unions as obstacles to economic prosperity and growth. The selfishness of the unions is thereby opposed to the solidarity of those who are ready to suffer painful but necessary reforms for the greater good – i.e. governing parties, employers and citizens. The general interest is thereby equated with 'objective' economic indicators and opposed to the union's supposedly partisan and *political* defence of particular interests.

If economic growth is in the interest of the general population, any action that damages economic growth goes against the interests of the general population. Especially strikes are targeted in this manner. The steady stream of press articles that calculate the financial costs of strikes and other actions should be mentioned here. For instance, one

article mentions that Agoria – a federation of companies active in the Belgian tech industry – estimated the cost of the 2014 strikes at two billion euros (Wauters & Eeckhout, 2014).

Strikes are also said to damage the *'image of the country'* (Vidal, 2014) in the eyes of multinational companies and foreign investors. This worry is informed by a concern with *competitiveness* central to neoliberalism. Bob Jessop argues that Schumpeterian workfare states aim 'to promote product, process, organizational and market innovation in open economies in order to strengthen as far as possible the structural competitiveness of the national economy by intervening on the supply side; and to subordinate social policy to the needs of labour market flexibility and/or to the constraint of international competition' (Jessop, 1994).

Whilst unions present themselves as defenders of jobs and job security, they are castigated for putting jobs at risk and for facilitating so-called economic suicide. Commenting on the striking unions the ground handling service Aviapartner at Brussels Airport, one journalist wrote that the unions 'may have reasons to be angry' but 'fail to see the big picture and 'endanger the jobs of others working in the airport' (Haeck, 2016). This type of criticism challenges the unions' claim to represent working class, middle class and national interests.

Some voices even argue that unions act against the interests of their own members by threatening their jobs and damaging the economy. This is why one critic argues that unions avoid their political responsibility because they do not point out to their members that *'sometimes the narrow sector-related demands have to make room for the broader general well-being at the negotiation table'* (Van de Voorde, 2016).

Job creation and growth should be the primary concerns of unions. Norbert De Batse-lier, president of the National Bank and former social-democratic politician even claims that *'employers and unions should not be doing politics but their jobs: creating jobs'* (De Batse-lier cited in Michielsen, 2014). In order to 'create jobs', labour laws need to be reformed. This criticism of the unions in the name of the economy, jobs and the general interest ties in closely with the criticism that union conservatism jeopardises the future of the country. Unions thus become the perfect obstacle for realizing the fantasy of a well-functioning economy and an internationally competitive Belgium.

Ordinary people as victims of nuisance caused by unions

Critics also oppose unions to the general interest by focusing on the nuisance unions cause for 'ordinary working people'. The notion of the nuisance paradigm is helpful here:

[...] nuisance paradigm coverage dismisses the method of protests by suggesting that protests cause more trouble than they are worth. Thus, while the protest paradigm typically disparages specific protests or participants, the nuisance paradigm promotes a more negative view of protests in general through an emphasis on perceived bothersome effects that, to some extent, inhere in protest as a tactic. (Di Cicco, 2010, p. 136)

Union-critical voices often portray citizens as 'victims' or 'hostages' (e.g. Sturtewagen, 2016a) of annoying unions that disturb the daily routines of life and work. Economics professor Paul De Grauwe wrote about 'train travellers' and 'companies who have nothing to do with the decisions taken by this government and who see their profits shrink'. He stated that 'if strikes cause damage to third parties it is legitimate to ask the question whether the right to strike can be exercised without limits' (De Grauwe, 2014). Vox pops with and social

media posts of affected travellers often provide fuel for union critics. It is consistently suggested in media coverage and opinion articles that mainstream public opinion is not supportive of union actions and strikes, even if opinion research shows a different picture (e.g. Swyngedouw et al., 2016).

Even those who sympathize with trade unions worry that strikes negatively affect public support for the unions. After a 'wild' (i.e. unannounced and unapproved) strike of train conductors, Yves Desmet of the centre-left newspaper *De Morgen* quoted the social democrat Karel van Miert. Following a series of train strikes that were 'difficult to explain', the latter reportedly said that 'the militants did not achieve anything but to turn commuters right-wing on the platform' (Desmet, 2014). Even though Desmet acknowledges the legitimacy of the massive demonstrations and strikes of 2014, he also thinks that 'a few hundred train conductors' risked all public support with the foolish actions of this tiny union (Desmet, 2014).

The nuisance frame, in combination with claims about public opinion and arguments about economic damage provides ammunition for those calling for mandatory minimum service in public transport, in the penitentiary system and in the airports. An obligation to provide a minimum service would impact profoundly on the union's power to disrupt daily life, to hurt business interests and to demonstrate capital's dependency on labour.

Rearticulating the debate as an intergenerational conflict

A third way of undermining the unions' claim to represent ordinary working people is to reframe the debate on austerity and labour reforms as an intergenerational issue and to criticize the unions for speaking exclusively for older generations. This generational framing of socio-economic policy has been quite prominent in Belgium, particularly in debates about pensions. What we see here is a clash between two political logics that structure the political field in different ways: the unions' left-right structuring of the political field is countered with a discourse structured by a generational logic.

Austerity measures and labour market reforms are presented as necessary in the light of intergenerational solidarity: acquired rights need to be given up in order to ensure the welfare of younger generations. An advertisement published on the eve of a national strike by VOKA, The Flemish Chamber of Commerce and Industry, displayed the following message in children's handwriting: 'thank you Mummy and Daddy, and all of the other people who work today in order to build my future' (Hanegreefs, 2014). Luc Coene, governor of the National Bank and associated with the liberal OpenVLD, labelled the protesters as 'people who said fuck you to their kids' (Coene cited in Wauters & Eeckhout, 2014).

Calls for intergenerational solidarity can also take a more subtle and consensual form. For example, an economist working for the pro-business think tank *Itinera* wrote that '*realizing that the interests of employers and employees converge in the long run, that would be a success. Because only then, you can start to work on a plan for the upcoming generation*' (Van de Cloot, 2014). Despite this more consensual tone, those who engage in protest and conflictual modes of politics are discredited as members of a selfish, well-off generation that leaves the mess for the next generation to clean up.

By framing the debate as an intergenerational conflict a binary opposition is created between those who argue for intergenerational solidarity and are prepared to make sacrifices on the one hand, and unions who endanger future prosperity on the other hand. This strategy interpellates young people worried about their own future as well as older generations who feel responsible for their children's future wellbeing. This delegitimization strategy frequently comes with accusations of union conservatism.

Rearticulating the debate as an ethno-linguistic conflict

Union protests are also framed in an ethno-linguistic manner. In 2016, when a number of long-lasting strikes took place in the French-speaking South of the country, a culturalist trope that distinguished between Flemish and Francophone protesters emerged in the discourse of politicians and mainstream media. An ethno-linguistic reading of the situation stressed that it is 'a large group of francophone wardens that stubbornly refuses to get back to work' (Sturtewagen, 2016b), and that they do so under the influence of 'mostly French speaking union leaders without scruples' (Sturtewagen, 2016b). Critics thus constructed a distinction between more 'reasonable' Flemish/Dutch speaking unions on the one hand, and unyielding radical francophone/Walloon unions on the other hand. This binary opposition runs parallel to the Flemish nationalist characterization of Flanders as a dominantly right-Wing society of hard workers and a socialist-dominated francophone Wallonia that profiteers from Flemish money (Maly, 2012, pp. 308–329). Flemish nationalist political scientist Bart Maddens wrote that:

In the end those strategic considerations have become obsolete because of social reality. Belgium is two countries. You could ignore this fact for a moment but then it will return with a vengeance. Or, as Chairman of the Chamber Siegfried Bracke (N-VA) usually says: 'reality is our biggest ally'. This communitarian reality has rarely shown itself as clearly as in the last couple of days. And all analyses confirm the Flemish nationalist perspective, whether they want to or not: there is a different culture in Wallonia, a greater readiness to go on strike, a different political constellation, the far left plays a more important role, and so on. (Maddens, 2016)

For Flemish nationalists, the differences between French-speaking and Flemish-speaking unions confirmed their image of Belgium as a dysfunctional sum of two incompatible cultures. Their ethno-linguistic logic is meant to drive a wedge between the unions in the North (Flanders) and the South (Wallonia). It delegitimizes the 'radical', 'far left' francophone unions as more antagonistic to Flanders and Flemish interests, than the Flemish unions.

Metadiscursive critiques: criticizing union communication

Large-scale political debates always involve metadiscourse. Political debates are struggles over the distribution of material and symbolic resources in society, but they also involve language about language and communication about communication (Blommaert, 2005, p. 253; Verschueren, 2004; Zienkowski, 2017). Such metadiscourse – understood here as discourse about the unions' discursive practices in the broad sense – is very present in our corpus. Unions are consistently accused of lies and disinformation, of communicating badly, of not having any answers, of exaggerating the problems, and of using polarizing

language, tactics and strategies. Critics often call for more contemporary and less disturbing tactics and strategies in the same breath.

For instance, Elke Wambacq, who runs an HR company called Dinobusters and who wrote two books on ‘dinosaurs in government’, calls upon unions to engage in a constructive dialogue. She labels their slogans ‘meaningless’ and suggests that ‘instead of fencing with angry shouts that do not mean anything in the end’, unions should try to get their message across by using social media or by ‘doing a flashmob at several occasions, whereby a little group communicates a message unexpectedly, preferably with a solution, in a creative and inspiring way’ (Wambacq, 2014). Such statements, which link up with the nuisance frame discussed above, fail to recognize that the power of unions resides in their capacity to generate nuisance and economic damage. This type of metadiscourse is highly compatible with constructions of unions as emotional, irrational and childish actors.

Politicians of governing parties frequently accuse unions of demagoguery and of spreading ‘half-truths’ and ‘lies’ (e.g. Parys (N-VA), 2014; Himpe (N-VA), 2014; Rutten (Open VLD) in Reynebeau, 2014). Likewise, the editor of the economics section of *De Standaard* Ruben Mooijman ‘dreams’ of ‘a union that does not engage in provocative language use, demagoguery or twisting the truth’ (Mooijman, 2016). Such metadiscourse is part of a wider metapolitical attack that targets the mode(s) of politics practiced by unions and union members.

Metapolitical critiques: De-legitimizing unions as polarizing and political

The type of metadiscourse discussed above – often based on ideas of what democratic discourse is and should be – links up with discourse about what democratic politics is and should be. It also links up with the question what actors should or should not have a role to play in political decision making (Zienkowski, 2019).

Metapolitical critique comes in two forms: a critique of unions as ‘polarizing’ entities and a critique of unions as ‘political’ actors. Both critiques can be interpreted as iterations of a neoliberal logic marked by a ‘disenchantment of politics by economics’ (Davies, 2014, p. 4). However, such critiques may also be informed by social democratic ideals of moderate and consensual politics central to the post-WWII political system.

The metadiscursive critique of unions’ polarizing *language and communication* is often articulated together with a critique of unions as conflictual and polarizing *political actors*. For example, Bart Brinckman of *De Standaard* begs to be delivered from ‘the heralds who pour oil onto the fire in the hope to benefit from this themselves’ (Brinckman, 2014). Metadiscursive commentaries on the tone of the debate are often closely integrated with critiques that target conflictual modes of politics more broadly. For instance, one editor dreams of an ideal union that contributes to a more harmonious society in the following reverie:

The union takes at its starting point a harmony-based model. It sees employers and the government not as opponents, but as partners whose interests largely run parallel with those of its members. It also assumes that they too strive towards a healthy economy with flourishing businesses who are able to create labour and prosperity because of this. (Mooijman, 2016)

This type of critique is based on a fantasy of politics as a consensus-oriented practice and contributes to the depoliticization of socio-economic policy as being in the general

interest (see 4.4). This is sometimes made very explicit. The liberal economist Van de Cloot writes that only when employers and employees realize that they have common interests, 'a vision for the future generation can be developed' (Van de Cloot, 2014). This argument links up with the intergenerational logic discussed above.

In some cases, critiques of polarization and pleas for serving the general interest may be motivated by an adherence to the Belgian socio-economic consensus model where employers and employees are supposed to act as 'social partners'. At the same time, many critics of the unions' polarizing strategies do not acknowledge that conflicting interests lie at the heart of the pact between employers and employees, with industrial peace being exchanged for participation in policy making processes and welfare services (see Ortu, 2014, p. 96). These critics miss the point that the ability to dissent and disturb constitutes a big part of the bargaining power that unions can bring to the negotiating table. Depictions of unions as polarizing actors often express 'consensual, classless and third way conceptions of the political' (Sean Phelan, 2007, p. 36). Such conceptions are part of 'third way neoliberalism' – a neoliberalism that has to be contrasted with the more 'antagonistic neoliberalism of the early neoliberals' (Sean Phelan, 2014, p. 8).

A preference for consensus typically comes with a consensual view of the economy and the general interest. It is closely intertwined with the idea that economic growth – defined in terms of a growing GDP that supposedly leads to 'job creation' – benefits all members of society. All social actors – including the unions – should therefore work together to create this type of growth. This is why they should not enter into a 'logic of conflict' that juxtaposes business and government interests to the interests of workers (see Phelan, 2014).

The metapolitical dimension of union critical discourse is perhaps most explicit when unions are accused of being 'political'. The category of the 'political' is thereby used to suggest that unions are overstepping their bounds, either by pursuing political goals of their own, or by being instrumentalized by party political actors. N-VA chairman Bart De Wever labelled the strikes of 2014 as 'the most political strikes ever' (De Wever in Van de Velden, 2014), framing the strikes as the work of the francophone socialist party PS (Parti Socialiste). The ex-chairman of the liberal union ACLVB accused the francophone unions of 'practicing politics' as well. He claimed that strikers were being 'exploited for political purposes' and that the far left was 'trying to cause the government to fall' (Vercaemst in D'Hoore, 2016).

This kind of critique targets the intentions of unions and their members. Rather than defending the rights of working people, so goes the argument, unions are playing party-political games that benefit social democrats and/or the far left. There is a profound metapolitical dimension to this type of critique: a belief in the so-called 'primacy of politics' (Dutch: *primaat van de politiek*) – i.e. the idea that elected politicians should have the first and the last say over policy issues and that civil society has an advisory or executive role to play at most.

The critique of unions being 'political' implies a restrictive definition of democratic politics that reduces democratic legitimacy to a matter of electoral results and delegitimizes union actions against elected governments as undemocratic. The Flemish nationalist political scientist Bart Maddens argues that 'a parliamentary majority that gives in to the blackmail of political strikes and street violence is not the apotheosis of democracy' (Maddens, 2016). The party political interpretation of the 'primacy of the political' sits awkwardly with the culture of consultation and concertation in which Belgian trade unions are

embedded. Limiting the role of trade unions to negotiating how to put government decisions into practice amounts to a break with the corporatist democratic model that has characterized Belgian labour politics for decades. Union critics tend not to pick up on the irony that the principle of a 'primacy of politics' is incompatible with the idea that austerity measures are inevitable, necessary and dictated by the global economy. The 'primacy of politics' refers exclusively to the power of political parties in government to dictate their politics to civil society.

Conclusion: a polyphonic critique of trade unions

In this article, we have identified six strands of critique aimed at trade unions: (1) critiques that depict unions as unrealistic and conservative anachronisms that are out of sync with the realities of our times; (2) critiques that psychologize unions as self-centred, irresponsible and child-like actors; (3) criminalization strategies that depict unions and unionists as vandals, as hostage takers and/or as terrorists; (4) a collection of strategies that opposes unions to a homogenized general interest; (5) metadiscursive critiques of unions' communicative practices; and (6) metapolitical critiques that attack unions for being polarizing and/or political actors.

Not all union critical voices articulate all strands of critique at all times. Nevertheless, the six strands of critique resonate within and across texts, voices and newspapers. What emerges is a heterogeneous but relatively coherent polyphonic discourse with metapolitical implications. The metaphor of polyphony allows us to conceptualize both coherence and heterogeneity in the corpus under investigation. Each of the abovementioned critiques is characterized by a particular melody. Even though there is no single conductor coordinating the orchestra into a harmonious symphony, the melodies and voices articulated in our corpus constitute a relatively consonant polyphony.

Not all of the voices present in the corpus may be neoliberal in any strict sense of the word but at the very least this polyphony contributes to a friendly environment for those supportive of neoliberal policies. Union critical polyphonic discourse undermines the legitimacy of trade unions as actors that resist neoliberal austerity measures. Complaints about the undesirable effects of strikes may not always be voiced with a neoliberal agenda in mind but such complaints tend to play into the hands of those who do pursue such an agenda. Even potentially well-intended critiques of trade union actions and strategies can contribute to the discursive disarticulation of citizens from union identities and demands.

It is possible to point at logic of depoliticization that characterizes polyphonic union critical discourse (Maesele & Raeijmakers, 2017; Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2015a, 2015b). Consensual concepts of politics combine well with a notion of the economy as an autonomous entity that escapes political control and whose needs can best be catered for with a politics of austerity (see Sean Phelan, 2014). Even if such concepts of politics are informed by corporatists logics of social concertation and not (only) by neoliberal desires, they can feed or reinforce a profoundly depoliticizing logic.

A depoliticizing logic can be observed in the discourse on the 'primacy of politics', but also in characterizations of unions as conservative, emotional and irrational actors who obstruct rational attempts to meet economic needs. It shows in discourse about the nuisance unions cause and in critiques that criminalize union tactics. It is observable when

critics accuse unions of selfishly defending their own interests at the expense of the general interest and can be observed in metadiscourse about union communication.

The fantasy of a conflict-free society and a politics in service of a smoothly functioning and internationally competitive economy underlies much union critical discourse. These fantasies pull the debate to the level of metapolitics. We are dealing with a debate about the relationship(s) between citizens and their political economy. The debate has implications for the types of politics that can be practiced legitimately by Belgian civil society actors. The polyphonic critique aimed at trade unions and their right to strike constitutes a metapolitical conflict over the structure of civil society and its impact on socio-economic decision-making processes.

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