

Myths on the Left: The Narrative and Discursive Practices of the *AFL-CIO News*

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The question that presents itself is what, if any, differences are there between the ultimate objectives of organized industry and those of organized labor? Suppose we pierce through the flaming slogans, noble writings and dramatic stories and look into the purposes and the philosophy of the organized labor movement in terms of its contrast to the character of organized capital. (Alinsky, 1969:26)

Maybe it is because progressive academics can always remember a verse or two from a Woody Guthrie song or because they cannot make old images of striking Wobblies disappear, but the number of studies of the ideological practices of the labour movement remains surprisingly low. Even if a general mistrust of labor organizations exists in left-wing circles, trade-unions are often constructed as fundamentally 'good' organizations in which little ideological or symbolical manipulation is actually taking place. The defense of the oppressed, the nobleness of purpose and the trade-unions' democratic pretension are seen as safeguards preventing this eventuality (Guérard, 1987:1994).

I believe, however, that ideological work is taking place 'on the Left' and that Alinsky's question still needs to be asked. Are the American trade-

Alternate Routes, Volume 11, 1994

unions really different from organized industry? Which forms of ideological and symbolical manipulation are being used inside the labour movement? I intend to bring a preliminary answer to these questions by looking at a cultural production of American labour and by conducting an analysis of the narrative and the discursive practices of the *AFL-CIO News*, a biweekly newspaper distributed to the unions' officers, employees and subscribing members.¹ However, before going any further, it is important to introduce the theoretical perspectives on ideology which allow for the examination of 'left-wing' practices and justify the selection of a labour newspaper as the object of analysis.

IDEOLOGY: FROM REPRESENTATION TO SOCIAL PRACTICES

When René Descartes defined the fundamental dichotomy between the mental process and the natural world (mind and body, subject and object), he also laid the groundwork that allowed for the conceptualization of ideology as a set of ideas or, to borrow from Althusser (1971), "representations." In classical Marxist thought, which must be situated inside this Cartesian paradigm, ideology can only be defined as the imaginary (false) representation of real (exterior) conditions of existence. From this perspective, two basic assumptions emerge: first, the discovery of a true or valid representation is possible and second, ideology cannot exist 'on the Left' because what is created there, according to Marxist theory, is an exact representation of one's conditions of existence.

In the semiological formulation, on the contrary, meaning never simply reflects the 'real.' Meaning is carried by the sign which is created when persons, connect a signifier and a signified (de Saussure, 1959). The creation of meaning appears as an individual process, but this does not imply a guarantee of total freedom: "We are not free to determine these relations [between signifier and signified] as we please: we are a part of a prearranged semiological world" (Lewis, 1991: 30). As Angus and Jhally (1989:2) point out: "People create their own meaning, but as Marx noted, 'not in conditions of their own choosing'."

The mobilization of this prearranged world of signification is the domain of ideological work. Thus, as Thompson (1984:131) suggests, “[t]o study ideology is to study the ways in which meaning (or signification) serves to sustain relations of domination.” This connection of meaning to the social order permits the transformation of the notion of ideology from a concept of internal ideas, into one of social practices. As Althusser notes, “certain notions have purely and simply disappeared from our presentation, whereas others on the contrary survive, and new terms appear...practices, rituals, ideological apparatus” (1971:159). These concepts open the door to the examination of the influence of cultural and ideological practices on the creation of meaning. Ideological practices must be connected to discursive and narrative practices and brought into the realm of the everyday, for they are a part of “a complex series of mechanisms whereby meaning is mobilized in the discursive practices of everyday life” (Thompson, 1984:63).

IDEOLOGICAL PRACTICES AND THE TRADE-UNIONS

The production of a labour newspaper, the organization of a strike, the training of newly elected officers, the negotiation encounters, the rallies, the conventions, the meetings and even the informal *tête-à-tête* around a well deserved drink, all become occasions of creation, enactment and reproduction of ideological practices. These practices interact and are mobilized in every phase of union life: the proceedings of a meeting are printed in the union’s newspaper, which is studied in a training session and in turn, the knowledge produced there helps to solve an interpersonal problem that occurs in a local committee. Through these ideological practices, the leadership of the trade-unions will attempt to develop and maintain a hegemonic control of the organization.

However, I believe that these ideological practices are better conceptualized as a set of resources used by relatively autonomous parts (sub-systems) of the trade-union than as a set of truths imposed upon the organization by the leadership. The ‘control room’ metaphor (Collins, 1989) fails to explain the observed ideological coherence.² As a resource, ideological practices will be

enacted by various actors in the everyday life of an organization. In his work *Asylum*, which describes the characteristics of total institutions, Erving Goffman crafted the notion of institutionalized motives, or frames of reference, which "may nevertheless function to restrain other types of interpretation" (1961:91). These frames of reference are ideological practices that will be used to regulate the organizational life.

Nevertheless, even if such social actors can enjoy a relative autonomy, the battle for the hegemonic control of labour organizations persists. In this struggle, a newspaper like the *AFL-CIO News* remains a crucial apparatus that needs to be controlled by the union leadership. In the everyday life of the American trade-unions, the *AFL-CIO News* provides the assorted stories, narratives and meta-narratives needed to interpret the social world. It presents the main social actors, describes their accomplishments and their predicaments, and constructs a totalizing representation of the world. The texts printed in this newspaper reflect the trade-union life and cannot be dissociated from the practices of production and decoding (reading). Because of this connection between the texts and the organizational practices, an analysis of the *AFL-CIO News* will allow for the discovery of the forms of ideological and symbolical manipulation that are taking place inside the organization.

Each and every story that is printed becomes a battleground in the quest for hegemony. When Barthes (1988b) discusses the nature of the text, he opposes the concept of a *writerly* text with the notion of a *readerly* one. The reader of a writerly text will be allowed to construct a variety of meanings from this source; the text is characterized by its openness. "We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning...but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (Barthes, 1988b:146). The cultivation of this hegemonic control is performed through multifarious efforts to close texts, to transform the writerly into the readerly and to limit the possibilities of meaning creation.³

The objective of this paper is to examine which stories are told, to find out who tells us these tales and to uncover which world view is promoted. The analysis will highlight the narrative and discursive elements that support three key ideological practices: practices of transformation, practices of commodification and practices of definition. The *AFL-CIO News* performs a transformation of the social actors' nature and characteristics: members who occupy an active social position as workers are transformed into the passive beneficiaries of the union's victories. The battles of the past—the worker's struggles and victories—are reduced to simple discursive commodities that are mobilized to support labour's image of continuity and radicalness. Finally, the newspaper defines, for the purposes of the internal debate, certain key political or organizational concepts: it establishes what are democratic practices, progressive attitudes and important issues. Through these practices, ideological structures that contribute to the perpetuation of the existing social and organizational systems are constructed, maintained and reproduced.

SOURCES OF DATA AND METHODS FOR THE ANALYSIS

The *AFL-CIO News* was founded in 1955 at the time of the merger between the AFL's trade-based unions and the CIO's industry based ones,⁴ most probably out of a necessity to create some sense of organizational cohesiveness in the renewed partnership. The publication evolved, slowly replacing articles constructed around formal statements of the labour's policy with stories more in tune with a modern 'journalistic' style. Nowadays, a rapid glance at any issue of the *AFL-CIO News* evokes images of the *USA Today*: colour on the first page, bold graphics, colour photographs and relatively short stories. Each story printed in the *AFL-CIO News* reproduces the name of the writer and this practice suggests the existence of mainstream media concepts such as the objectivity of the press.

The study was conducted through an analysis of three issues of the AFL-CIO official newspaper: the *AFL-CIO News*. These issues were randomly selected over a one year period (1990). Each story and photograph was

constructed as a basic unit of analysis, using the concept of *lexia* defined by Barthes (1974:13): "the best possible space in which we can observe meaning." This method produced 131 different items for the analysis (89 articles, 35 photographs and 7 graphics/tables).

THE SOCIAL ACTORS

"*Qui est le donateur du récit?*" (Barthes, 1971:25). When he asks who gives us the tale, Barthes implicitly states the importance of the identification of the story's narrator. According to the framework developed in *L'analyse structurale du récit*, the tale can either be narrated by a single individual (the expression of a personal subjectivity), or attributed to a total consciousness (a diffuse and Godlike authority). It is also possible for the characters of a story to give an account of their own actions. In the case of the *AFL-CIO News*, the second option seems to be the rule: a diffuse authority, the conscience of the union movement, describes a complex world in which various protagonists engage in social actions.

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THE PHOTOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE

In the modern newspaper, the text is still an essential element, the photograph an optional one. Yet photographs, when they appear, add new dimensions of meaning to a text. As Roland Barthes has observed, "pictures...are more imperative than writing, they impose meaning at one stroke, without analyzing or diluting it." (Hall, 1972:53)

	Leaders	Members	Politicians	Others	Total
Men	46	35	3	4	88
Women	1	11	1	3	16
Children	0	0	0	2	2
Total	47	46	4	9	106

Figure1: The representation of persons according to gender and stated occupation

With only one exception⁵ the 35 photographs included in the selected issues of the *AFL-CIO News* represent persons taking part in various

activities. Figure 1 identifies the represented persons according to their gender and their stated occupation.

The obvious situation revealed by these numbers is that men outnumber women on a 5:1 ratio. The unions are described as places where men take control of the action and occupy the roles of protector of women and owners of the public life. This description reinforces the dominant values of struggle, brute force and violence. In union life, women participate in protests or in membership meetings; the union allows some place for women but only if they assume a pre-defined role as a member. There is no place here for specificity, as the following story demonstrates: "For 114 years, conventions of the Marine Engineers have been a men only function.... The tradition ended this year.... Two women delegates were present.... They received a round of applause from the 46 male delegates" (AFL-CIO, 1990b:4). Even if the presence of two women is acknowledged the story will quickly reduce them to their normal status—simple delegates. In addition to this split along gender lines, a second division is established between the members and the leaders of the unions: the latter roughly equal the number of the former, but there is only one woman among the 47 leaders depicted. Furthermore, the distinction between leadership and membership is deepened, using the criteria of variety and seriousness of the activity. Figure 2 describes the activities in which the leaders engage.

Men who are leaders...	
Are taking part in a meeting or in a discussion	17
Stand or speak on a podium to a crowd	12
Talk to or listen to a politician	9
Lead a rally or a protest	3
Inspect a factory	2
Attend training sessions	2
Portrait of...	1

Figure 2: Activities of trade-union leaders.

The leaders are active. They take part in meetings and discussions with other union leaders or with important individuals such as technical experts, politicians, public agencies managers or company chairpersons. The representation of this activity simultaneously produces an opposition between the nature of the work performed by the officers and ordinary workers, and creates a theatrical opposition/relation between union and society's leaders. The dramatic action will be characterized by the exchanges between these important social actors, thus excluding the members from the definition and the resolution of their own problems. A second oppositional/relational pair is defined between the leaders and the union's members when the officers are represented standing on a podium, addressing a crowd or leading a rally. Each of these performances requires an audience and the members fulfill that function and contribute to the construction of a dynamic relation between the leaders' activity and the members' passivity.

On the other hand, the members represented in the photographs of the *AFL-CIO News* act as good union members, holding signs, protesting or picketing. Figure 3 offers a complete tally of the pictured activities. Workers are represented almost exclusively as participants in union activities, emphasizing their identity as members. This implied definition relates directly to the needs of the organization and to those of its leaders. It also excludes from labour's scene the non-unionized workers (unemployed persons, welfare recipients). The political and ideological life of the AFL-CIO and its social projects refer only to the world of the members.

Men who are members...

Protest, picket or hold signs	26
Talk and chat with other members	3
Work at their usual jobs	2
Take care of a child while protesting	1
Inspect the site of an accident	1
Sit on a couch with wife and child	1
Portrait of...	1

Figure 3: Activities of trade-union members.

OUTSIDE THE ORGANIZATION

The members simply do not exist as significant social actors in the public sphere, outside the organizational realm. This public world belongs to the unions' leaders. Labour's action, an essentially collective process, are individualized and reduced in the *AFL-CIO News*' reports to the union leader's activities. Leaders are named and their functions and responsibilities are always spelled out. "AFL-CIO Vice-President Lenore Miller... Vice-President Owen Bieber of the UAW... Charles B. Dale President of the Newspaper Guild... Alfred Di Tolla, President of the Stages Employees..." (AFL-CIO, 1990c:8). This technique transforms the benefits of the collective action into the results of the hard work of certain individuals, a direct connection to the dominant ideological values of individuality. The unions are successful because they have effective leaders. In addition, the trade-unions are transformed into tools or resources personally owned by the officers. In the following story a reader may believe that the leaders are pledging their own money to support the New York Daily News strikers.

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Vice-President Morton Bahr of the Communication Workers pledged \$50 000, while Vice-President John J. Sweeney of the Service Employees and John Kelly of the Office and Professional Workers each pledged \$30 000..." (AFL-CIO, 1990c:8)

In the social world, labour's leaders interact with various politicians who are always referred to as representatives of one political party. In the description of the politicians, there are no surprises: the Democrats are the good guys "...an amendment was offered by Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.). Supported by the AFL-CIO, it would have granted supplemental benefits..." (AFL-CIO, 1990b:3) and the Republicans the bad ones "...symbolic of the scraps left over for working people under the Bush capital gains tax plan" (AFL-CIO, 1990b:3). The leaders also meet with employers ('the real producers of wealth') and appeal to judges (who protect society from the actions of the greedy captains of industry).

A STUDY OF THE NARRATIVES

Now that the key actors that inhabit the world of the *AFL-CIO News* have been identified, an analysis of the narrative structures used in the newspaper may reveal how they act and what is the nature of the relations between the protagonists. The organization of the narrative constructs an internal structure into the text and, in so doing, limits the reader's ability to create meaning. Eco (1981) illustrated how such configurations organize the decoding of a specific story. However, the influence of the narratives goes beyond this internal effect: the repetition of specific structures produces an ideological effect by limiting the range of possible decodings of texts. The interpretation pattern thus created will be transferred and used in the interpretation of a wider range of social events. The study of the labour movement's publications reveals the existence of a central narrative and the presence of a series of secondary narratives used as supporting stories.

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THE MAIN NARRATIVE

The main narrative is reproduced in a number of stories and it can be used to integrate the remaining articles inside a coherent ideological framework. An effective way to introduce this narrative is to examine a story constructed around it:

Local 802 also won a first contract for the musicians who perform with the Concert Pops of Long Island. Those members overwhelmingly ratified a first contract with the New York Brass Choir Inc., the parent group of the Concert Pops. The three year accord provides job security for the 39 musicians who were organized in July 1990. Complaints of late payment of wages and of arbitrary dismissals had prompted the organizing drive. The contract addresses those issues. (AFL-CIO, 1990c:7)

The basic narrative structure displayed here consists of a succession of three different moments: the union won a contract, the members approved it

and finally, the contract provided benefits to the union's members. Two preliminary stages usually appear before this dramatic progression: the union knows how to act and, using this knowledge, it initiates the action. If these initial phases are included in the basic framework, the completed sequence of action unfolds in the order illustrated in figure 4.

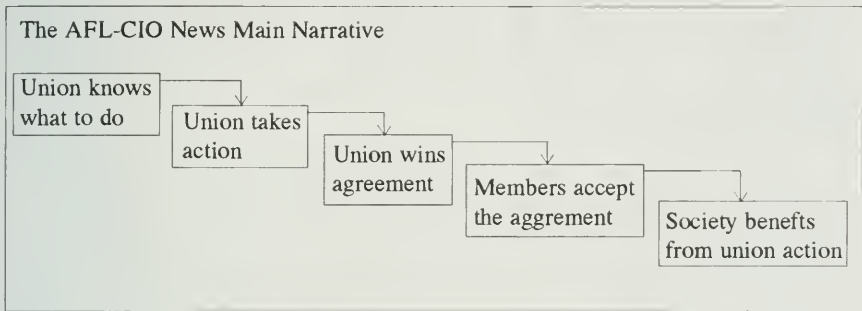


Figure 4: The AFL-CIO News main narrative structure.

The first moment of the sequence is characterized by the construction of the union as a legitimate organization: *the unions know what to do*. This legitimation is performed through a series of stories that promote the personal qualities of the union leaders. A recurring column, appearing in every issue of the *AFL-CIO News*, is entitled "Newsmakers." Inside this feature information regarding the whereabouts of the movement's leaders is published. "Robert T. McIntyre, executive Vice-President of the Pennsylvania AFL-CIO...recently was presented the first annual William E. Cockerill Sr. award by the United Way of Lackawanna County..." (AFL-CIO, 1990c:9). In addition, the unionists will appear in photographs that represent them working, often early in the morning, in the company of important public personages. "Sen. John Glenn (D-Ohio) addresses nuclear concerns at a breakfast meeting with conference delegates" (AFL-CIO, 1990b:4). At a second level a valorization of the technical skills mastered by the union officers is produced when the *AFL-CIO News* promotes the organization's

training program: "The craft of negotiation, Negotiation and writing contract language, Advanced arbitration and Working with the news media..." are several of the showcased skills (AFL-CIO, 1990c:7).

However, this fabrication of the unions' legitimacy depends for the greater part on the appropriation (reinterpretation) of the past and on the continuous demonstration of the justness of the organization's cause. In the first issue of the year the *AFL-CIO News* ran a three-page story entitled "American Labour in the 80's" (AFL-CIO, 1990a:10-12). This article presents a series of cases in which the persistence displayed by the workers lead to important victories.

The Clothing and Textile Workers won a contract at J.P. Stevens after a 17-year struggle. Ten years after the UAW began an organizing drive, the tenacity of its members finally yielded a contract with Ortner Freight Car Co. (AFL-CIO, 1990a:10)

76 The survey of the previous battles is used to construct the image of the 'noble worker.' It associates this image with the American trade-unions and creates a reservoir of tales that will be slowly added to labour's mythology. The article moves forward and gives the reader the official history of the preceding decade.

The 1980's were marked by another phenomenon: the emergence of the two-tier contract, which permitted lower wage scales for new entrants... This management demand was less than palatable for workers and their unions. But the double-digit unemployment rate of the Reagan Recession was taking its toll on workers and their families, and unions reluctantly bowed to this economic necessity. (AFL-CIO, 1990a:11)

This reinterpretation of the past will be etched in stone and will become as definitive, within the movement, as is the story of the Great Depression. Union members or officers who opposed this political line of concessions will not be able to refer back to their own interpretation of what is now labelled as the 'Reagan Recession.'⁶ The bottom line is that the labour movement

survived the Reagan years and business can go on as usual. "A union card remains the worker's best friend" (AFL-CIO, 1990a:12).

This commodification of the workers' past struggles through ideological practices does not stop there as selected worker's biographies are used to legitimate the union's actions. A series of articles on the issue of occupational health and safety accomplishes this task by presenting several cases of injured workers. "Harold Gallegos, a soft-spoken man, has endured two years of untold pain and suffering since being contaminated by a chemical soup mixture..." (AFL-CIO, 1990b:7). This is the classical appeal to a higher moral ground: if the unions are fighting to protect the sick and even to prevent death, how can one oppose its actions?

The second stage of the narrative sequence occurs when *the union initiates action*. This narrative moment reifies the union itself and presents it as the real initiator of various actions. As a consequence, workers and union members are excluded from the key moments of collective action, the elaboration of the strategy and the decision to act. If the union can be identified as the source of the action, the future benefits will be attributed to the union, thus justifying its existence. This process is used in the body of the various stories. "The Arkansas AFL-CIO joined in a complaint to the Federal Communication Commission claiming that a major television station slanted its coverage on a state ballot question" (AFL-CIO News, 1990c:5). But most often it operates in the headlines' text. "Unions seek right to act to save workers lives" (AFL-CIO, 1990c:2). The other technique used to produce this effect is to credit the union's leader with the initiation of the action. A typical illustration of this method can be found in the caption of one photograph: "Union Presidents Vincent Sombrotto, left, and Moe Biller rally members of the Letter Carriers and Postal Workers outside the USPS headquarters" (AFL-CIO, 1990c:6). The members disappear from the scene as the union leads the way: "AFL-CIO Vice-President Lenore Miller of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Stores Union, said RWDSU pledged \$75 000, with \$55 000 coming from its Local 1199." (AFL-CIO, 1990c:8) The

fact that real members contributed their own money in solidarity for the New York Daily News strikers becomes irrelevant.

The natural consequence of any action on the part of the union is that *the union wins an agreement*; this constitutes the third stage of the narrative. The union gains new benefits for its members, "Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) at three Arizona supermarket chains won wage increases and lump-sum payments under a new five-year contract" (AFL-CIO, 1990a:2); signs agreements with employers, "...the UAW has won agreements that the companies will join in the effort for a national solution to the U.S. health care problem" (AFL-CIO, 1990c:1) or wins court battles, "ACTWU legal action wins retiree center for 20 000" (AFL-CIO, 1990b: 13). Once again, the contribution made from the workers becomes an element of the background. Sometimes the workers have to strike: "A week long strike by 11 000 members of the Services Employees Local 399..." (AFL-CIO, 1990b:15). However, even if this action was staged by the union's members, the headline of this article reads: "SEIU local wins contract at HMO." The reified union becomes the true social actor.

The fourth stage of the narrative begins when *the members accept the agreement* which the union obtained for them. The role reserved for the members is quite limited, essentially they will have the opportunity to cast a ballot to approve the results of the bargaining between the union's representatives and the employer. "IAM members at McDonnell Douglas Aircraft Co. ratified a three-year agreement that provides a 11.5% wage increase plus lump-sum bonuses over the contract term" (AFL-CIO, 1990a:2). In this article, the percentages of the approval vote are emphasized. This provides a clear indication of the democratic structure of the union and, especially when the result of the ratification vote is overwhelming, gives an indication of the approval rating of the union performance. To give an impression of being a democratic organization seems to be important. Another story explains that a union organized a ratification vote through a mail-in ballot. What can be more democratic than a vote in which every member had the opportunity to express his/her opinion in the privacy of his/her own home? No

membership meetings where anti-democratic practices may take place, no debate and no pressure. The kind of democracy promoted by the trade-unions bears a striking resemblance to the mainstream American practice of voting once every four years without taking part in any kind of public debate.

The last part of the central narrative describes how the workers and society in general benefit from the trade-union's actions. The workers' gains are presented in every article reporting on the settlement of a negotiation. The descriptions of the benefits are usually very detailed so that everyone can have a precise idea of the gains reaped by the union. Moreover, the effects of the union's action reach not only the workers but also members of society at large. In a report of a conference on nuclear safety this is stated in a straightforward manner: "Concerned activity by the various unions have helped reduce risks in recent years, but the greed of private contractors and the lax administration of the DOE has added to those risks" (AFL-CIO, 1990a:4). But sometimes the connections are far more subtle. One article runs under the following headline: "UMAW wins right to work Navajo repeal" (AFL-CIO, 1990c:5). The story explains how the Navajo Tribal Council, under pressure from the United Mine Workers of America, removed a right to work disposition in favour of the Navajo workers from the local legislation. The result of the vote was 34-33. "[S]aid Eugene Badonie, president of UMWA Local 1924. 'From now on, the Navajo people will have good labour laws'" (AFL-CIO, 1990c:5). One man's notion of progress is another man's notion of genocide.

THE POWER OF THE MAIN NARRATIVE

The basic form of this main narrative is so predominant in the articles of the *AFL-CIO News* that it will be used to report the 'not so successful' contract negotiations. "The United Transportation Union reached agreement with the CSX Corp. railroad subsidiary to reduce crew sizes. About 375 workers will be affected by the change.... Another 175 furloughed brakemen will not return to their jobs under the accord. They may have either a \$5000 separation allowance or the relocation money (\$20 000 if jobs are available)" (AFL-CIO, 1990a:4). In this story, the main narrative sequence is used and its

ideological dominance allows for the presentation of this defeat (375 eliminated jobs) as an ordinary bargaining report. The employer bargained in good faith and reached an agreement, the union did its job and the employees will be awarded a separation allowance. A defeat becomes a victory. The narrative structure clearly limits the possibility to look for global explanations outside the typical pattern. If it cannot be explained, then it becomes an Act of God.

THE NARRATIVES FOR ACTION

In the second stage of the main narrative the unions organize and engage in various social actions. The examination of the different conceptions of social action displayed in the *AFL-CIO News* reveals a strong preference for legal action, political action and collective bargaining. Figure 5 shows the articulation of these different modes of action.

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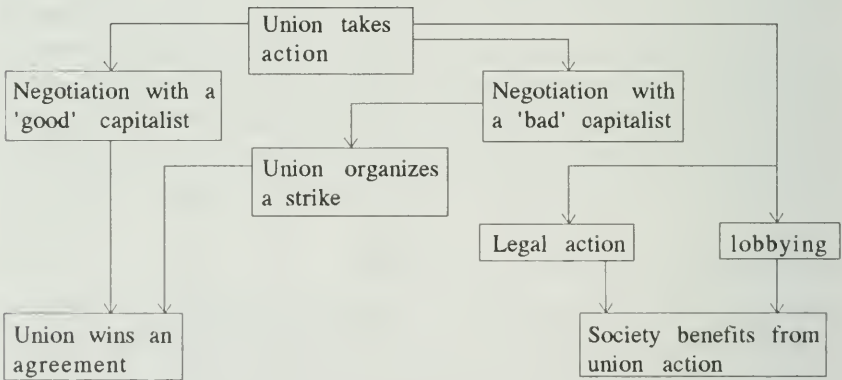


Figure 5: The narratives for union action

Initiating legal action is one of the preferred tactical avenues used by American trade-unions. A labour organization instigates legal action to gain

general benefits for its members or to solve a complex bargaining process. Legal action is important for the labour movement mostly because its conception of the interrelations between the social system and the legal world is similar to the point of view usually promoted in the American society. The possibilities for individual and collective action are embodied in 'rights' which are created by laws. "That includes the right to refuse life-threatening work without suffering recrimination for the employer, and the right for the workers' representative to participate fully..." (AFL-CIO, 1990c:2). In consequence, pressing to get new legislation passed is constructed as an important activity because this action results in further protection for members and society. "The Communication Workers urged the swift passage of legislation to curb workplace violations of privacy by employers and to protect the rights of workers and consumers" (AFL-CIO, 1990c:11). Getting new legislation is the way to reform society and to use such tactics demonstrates complete agreement of the labour movement with the actual 'rules of the game.' "Organized labour is completely committed to getting reform legislation introduced in the next Congress and 'we will do everything we can do to get it passed' Donahue said" (AFL-CIO, 1990c:2). When the law is constructed as the prime ruling force of society and when the U.S. Constitution provides 'Justice for All,' appealing to the Courts to obtain justice becomes the legitimate way to act. "A union and human rights alliance is suing the Bush administration..." (AFL-CIO, 1990b:4) or "The lawsuit was brought by Civil Service Employees Association Local 830, on behalf of 7000 public workers" (AFL-CIO, 1990a:3). Even if the Courts are portrayed as neutral bodies, the union prefers to keep a firm control over their actions. "Biller said that the unions still would like to settle negotiation without proceeding to arbitration, 'where anything can happen'" (AFL-CIO, 1990c:1).

In this context, the activity of lobbying becomes an appealing way to press for new legislative protection. Union leaders perform this mission when they schedule meetings with state or federal politicians. "Georgia Building Trades delegation calls on Rep. Ben Jones (D-Ga.) during the BCTD

legislative conference in Washington" (AFL-CIO, 1990 b:3). The promotion of members' interests is also accomplished through public lobbying, when unions stage press conferences in which the leaders present their policy proposals on various topics. "In a white paper titled 'Legacy of Neglect: America's Decaying Roads and Bridges' Iron Workers' President Jake West warns that the decaying road system also would undercut productivity, jobs and even global competitiveness" (AFL-CIO, 1990c:3). Yet, a more effective way to exert influence is for the union officers to become accepted members of the 'old boys network.' The AFL-CIO's officers excel in this trade. "Co-chairs of the event included AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Thomas R. Donahue, General Motors Corp. Chairman Robert Stempel and Richard J. Schmeelk, Chairman of C.A.I. Advisors" (AFL-CIO, 1990c:7).

Nevertheless, even if legal action and lobbying remain important activities, the negotiation of collective agreements remains the AFL-CIO *raison d'être*: "Through contract negotiation where possible and through legislative action when necessary, labour will..." (AFL-CIO, 1990a:12). The examination of contract bargaining stories reveals the basic ideological assumptions of American labour and a fundamental community of interest existing between the employers and the unions. "In every sector of our society, there is a growing commitment to consider a new national approach..." (AFL-CIO, 1990c:1). This is not only explicitly stated in the articles but also suggested by the kind of treatment reserved for the good capitalist, the employer who chooses to play within the good faith bargaining scenario proposed by the unions. These rational employers are praised for their actions: "Exel, a subsidiary of Cargill Inc., undertook the agreement out of enlightened management philosophy that a company that is not part of the solution is part of the problem" (AFL-CIO, 1990a:3). The ideal narrative for the bargaining stories is built around the idea that a serious and intensive bargaining taking place between a union and an *enlightened* employer will yield an agreement both parties will find beneficial. A small dose of common sense then proves that the economic system works for everyone. "[R]apid conclusion of our negotiations was possible only because both parties entered

the process with a firm commitment to move forward and to avoid the kind of adversarial labour relations we had seen at Eastern” (AFL-CIO, 1990a:2). Ultimately, this construction goes beyond the bargaining process itself and becomes the metaphor upon which society should be organized: a negotiation of interests and advantages in which each party enters in good faith is seen as the only civilized way to work in a capitalist society. If everyone agrees to abide by this general rule, no one should lose and the emergence of conflict becomes rare, if not impossible.

However, a small number of employers, because of bad faith or mere ineptitude, reject the model proposed by the labour movement. If the employer displays an improper behaviour, the *AFL-CIO News* will compare its actions to those of more responsible managers. “Theatrical Stage Employees Local 1 voted strike authorization against CBS Inc., after successfully bargaining new agreements with rival networks NBC and ABC” (AFL-CIO, 1990b:15). The workers had to give the union a strike authorization, but this kind of action is always the consequence of the employers’ position in the bargaining process. “The News management made a cold, deliberate decision to work against unions and their employees...” (AFL-CIO, 1990c:1). If, later in the process, the employees have to walk out, it will be in response to the employer’s bad faith: either management delayed too long to initiate the bargaining process or demanded unreasonable concessions from the workers. “The 1700 miners walked off the job after 17 months of stalled negotiations. Pittston was seeking to eliminate or sharply cut health benefits...” (AFL-CIO, 1990a:2). At this point, it is important to stress that the AFL-CIO will never describe an ongoing strike as a success, the decision to initiate this pressure tactic is always a result of the employer’s action and a major failure of the bargaining process. Only when the strike is over will its memories and images be transformed and become part of the union’s mythology. The union continually works for a quick termination of the strike and tries to convince the employer of the losses caused by this ordeal. “But the company’s own financial reports...show that an end to the strike would be in the interests of all parties: workers, creditors and management” (AFL-CIO, 1990b:2). The

end of a labour dispute is always presented as the end of a nightmare, and both labour and management wish for a different scenario when the time to bargain a new contract arrives. "Pittston Chairman Paul W. Douglas saluted the miners and their families... He expressed hope that labour and management could develop a long term solution..." (AFL-CIO, 1990a:2).

THE MYTHICAL DISCOURSES

The utilization of myth can be related to a series of discursive practices that support the narratives and strengthen the worldview presented in the *AFL-CIO News*. However, the existence and the effects of myth remain subtle and difficult to detect and this is why its investigation bears such a weight in the discovery of ideological practices. According to Barthes (1988a), myth naturalizes the association of determinate meanings with specific signifiers and performs this association in an ambiguous manner: it can be done through a simple juxtaposition of two different sets of signifiers or through displacement (or substitution) of usual meaningful associations. The impact of the myth is instantaneous in nature: "...myth essentially aims at causing an immediate impression—it does not matter if one is later allowed to see through the myth, its action is assumed to be stronger than the rational explanations which may later belie it.... That is all and that is enough" (Barthes, 1988a:130). Because of its naturalness, the ideological effects of the myth will survive its unravelling. "A more attentive reading of the myth will in no way increase its power or its ineffectiveness: a myth is at the same time imperfectible and unquestionable; time or knowledge will not make it better or worse" (Barthes, 1988a:130).

A demonstration of a mythical creation of meaning by a juxtaposition of signifiers can be found in the article entitled "Unions Seek Right to Act to Save Workers' Lives" (AFL-CIO, 1990c:2). The first step used here describes the safety conditions existing in the American factories as similar to those of wartime conditions: "...the war in the American workplace daily claims victims. Workers pay the toll, employers pocket the profits and 20 years of attempts by the OSHA to diminish the sacrifice have failed" (AFL-

CIO, 1990c:2). The juxtaposition is completed, a paragraph later, recalling the Vietnam war: "For 16 years the bloodshed in Vietnam appeared in nightly newscasts and the tally is inscribed on a memorial black granite walls—58 175 names..." (AFL-CIO, 1990c:2). This association yields a predominant meaning: the killing that takes place in the workplace produces real deaths, as serious as the ones occurring in combat. Still, it goes beyond the obvious; comparison between the workers and the soldiers, between the trade-unions and the Nation, between the employers and the enemy, and finally, an association between the workers' struggle and the plight of the American soldiers forced to fight with 'a hand tied behind their back' are created.

In some cases, the discursive strategies become more subtle and involve a succession of associations and substitutions that foster the desired effect. Several days before Thanksgiving, this complex technique is displayed in a feature headlined "Children Are the Victims of Foreign Toymakers" (AFL-CIO, 1990c:3). The title of the article builds on an ambiguity; at the first glance it can be deciphered as 'American kids are the victims of *unsafe* foreign made toys.' During the Christmas season, every parent or adult wishes to protect the safety of his/her children, nephews and nieces. This headline creates an enigma and the reader seeks to know which toys to avoid in order to fulfill his/her mission and bring joy and pleasure to American children. Reading the article resolves this enigma by creating an additional mystery, the story describes the conditions of exploitation of child labour in overseas factories located in Asia. "The young workers slept in dormitories, two or three to a bed, and earned \$10 to \$31 a month. Twice a month, children as young as 10 were forced to work 24-hours shifts" (AFL-CIO, 1990c:3). Five countries are named in the first two paragraphs of the story: Taiwan, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Thailand and China, but in the rest of the article, only China is mentioned.

This feature is constructed on three main arguments: first, capitalists who exploit children are 'evil' capitalists and must not be encouraged, second these exploiters are foreign nationals or even communists (the multiple references to China), and finally, to stay on the safe side, all foreign-made toys

should be avoided. The myth is created when the American trade-unions cast themselves in the role of the defender of children and implore the reader to join them in the boycott of foreign made toys. This illusion is completed by a side story entitled "Buy these toys," in which the American corporations are named and a list of the appropriate and safe products is displayed. Now, the consumer knows how to act and can alleviate his/her guilt by enacting a dominant bourgeois myth, the ideal of a good consumer. Not only does this story negate the fact that exploitation and domination thrive in American factories and conceal the connection between overseas sub-contractors and U.S. companies, but it also contributes to the support of one of the *AFL-CIO News*' main narratives: that the trade-unions are the best defense against exploitation in general.

THE TECHNIQUES OF MYTH

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In the last pages of *Mythologies*, Barthes describes a group of rhetorical practices (that he situates 'on the Right') used in everyday discourse in the creation of myths: inoculation, the privation of history, identification, Neither-Norism, the quantification of quality, tautology and the statement of fact are some of these discursive figures. Examples of several of these rhetorical techniques can be found in the *AFL-CIO News*. For the purposes of this article only inoculation, identification, and the quantification of quality shall be discussed.

Inoculation works by admitting into the narratives a small quantity of opposing stories, tying in with notions of freedom of speech, plurality and democracy. This nominal dose of evil awakens the ideological immune system and in so doing supports a general claim that the system as a whole functions well. More often than not, the *AFL-CIO News* uses this method by opposing a small number of 'bad' capitalists to a group of employers who accept the rules of the game and bargain with the trade unions. The construction of Eastern airlines as such an antagonistic employer starts in January (AFL-CIO, 1990a:2), continues in April (AFL-CIO, 1990b:1) and is still going on at the end of November (AFL-CIO, 1990c:2); a surprising

continuity if the randomness of the selection of the material for the analysis is taken into account. Naming the individuals involved contributes to the attribution of the responsibility for the system's mishaps to individual behaviour. The trustee (Martin Shugrue) is presented as a misbehaving administrator who is overoptimistic, who lies and refuses to talk to the unions. "[A] trustee be appointed to replace former Eastern boss Frank Lorenzo.... Instead of bargaining with the IAM, Shugrue conducted a 'smoke and mirror' campaign to rebuild ridership..." (AFL-CIO, 1990c:2). The reader is asked to remember the irrational actions of Frank Lorenzo, those that led to the demise of Eastern Airlines: "...the latest chapter in the downward spiral of an airline that once was a major force in the industry" (AFL-CIO, 1990c:2). This presentation of 'evil' capitalists ultimately reinforces the belief that the system can work well if everyone contributes; the whole society benefited from the existence of Eastern Airlines and now, it no longer exists.

Identification relates to the representation of the other; its conventions enable the reader to deal with the question of difference and similarity between individuals or groups and, in so doing, to construct a sense of identity. Depending on what the preferred effect is, the manipulation of identity that takes place in the *AFL-CIO News* revolves around the opposition between being an American and being a worker. To a union member, being a worker is important when he/she is confronted with other workers having different identities or a different set of social problems, and the common bond of labour will be stressed by a number of articles. Union leaders from different countries are presented in the pages of the paper: a Bulgarian leader meets with the American labour president (AFL-CIO, 1990b:13), a Polish Solidarity member expresses support for U.S. miners (AFL-CIO, 1990b:15), Salvadorian unionists are portrayed as participants in a peace conference (AFL-CIO, 1990b:6) and the plight of Cuban workers will be the angle used to discuss the social and economic situation in that country (AFL-CIO, 1990c:4). However, stressing the similarities between workers of different nations is always balanced by an appeal to American values or interests. An interesting angle on this can be found in an article entitled "Union, Right

Group Sue Bush over Trade Preference.” (AFL-CIO, 1990b:4). In this, the AFL-CIO appears to be preoccupied with the human rights violations that happen in foreign countries and where employers “...take advantage of cheap, exploited labour” (AFL-CIO, 1990b:4). In fact, this article develops side by side narratives: the first one tells the members that American jobs can be protected by reverting to protectionist measures and the second story pretends that something is done to promote the cause of human rights in foreign countries. In this case, the labour movement is not asking the administration to put pressure on the Nations with bad records but rather to cut trade, thus removing unfair competition for AFL-CIO’s members. Suddenly, the foreigners are not workers any more and the good foreigners are the ones who imitate American values. “Geraldo Aroyo, president of the AFSCME Local 3345, delivered a remarkable soliloquy that ranged from his six-mile swim to freedom 25 years ago to his Vietnam war service, to his fight for justice for the groundskeepers at Florida International University” (AFL-CIO, 1990c:4). For the American trade-unions, international solidarity still translates in the export of the U.S. model of unions: free unions, capitalism and democracy are included in the same package.

The *quantification of quality* is an operation that reduces an aesthetic or a political quality to mere numbers. “By reducing any quality to quantity, myth economizes intelligence” (Barthes, 1988a:153). The *AFL-CIO News* returns to this practice when dealing with the concepts of representativeness and democracy. A trade-union is representative and efficient when it represents an important number of persons and many stories will leave no doubt of the importance of AFL-CIO’s unions in the mind of the reader: “The APWU and NALC representing 568 000 employees formed the joint bargaining committee...” (AFL-CIO, 1990c:1) or “...is a 22 minutes documentary video tape describing RWDSU Local 1199’s recent contract victory for 50 000 health care workers...” (AFL-CIO, 1990c:7). The sheer force of numbers can also be expressed in actions of solidarity: “A coordinated campaign by 8000 steelworkers at 23 plants in the U.S. and Canada...” (AFL-CIO, 1990b:4). This method also serves to establish the democratic character of the unions: the number of actual voters or percentages are disclosed in

numerous stories and are used to qualify the approval vote on a contract agreement. "Steelworkers at 13 LTV steel plants overwhelmingly ratified a new agreement...USWA members approved the settlement by a 10 026-1131 margin" (AFL-CIO, 1990b:2). On these grounds, it becomes impossible to use a different criteria to judge the quality of the agreement; one just has to look at the numbers. The fact that the union was unable to organize a strike, that the pattern of negotiation was set in a similar factory or that the bargaining committee sold out, are transformed into useless arguments. In a way, this line taps in the argument developed by the Rock the Vote media blitz:⁷ if you do not vote, you cannot criticize the results of the election or the actions of the elected officials.

THE WORLD ACCORDING TO THE AFL-CIO

This description of the social actors, narrative structures and myths created in the *AFL-CIO News* can be summarized along two axes of opposition presented in figure 6.

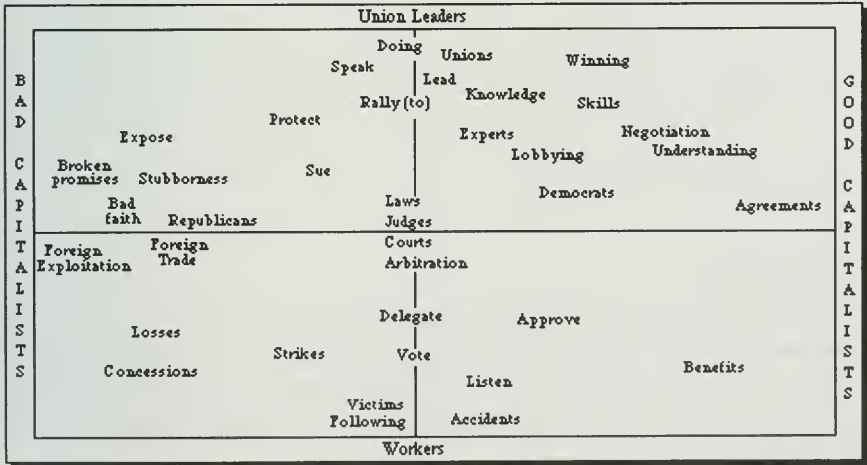


Figure 6: The world according to the AFL-CIO News.

The first opposition links the union leaders and the workers in a relationship of membership in the trade-union. The workers are powerless victims of the inequities of the system. Their only hope to get out of this situation is to join the union where they will find a place to fit into a more global system. By joining the union, they will delegate their power to the leaders and receive the benefits provided by them. The leaders have the knowledge and the skills to negotiate with employers and to protect the members from the greediness of 'evil' employers. The second oppositional axis describes the social system. The world is organized on a continuum of good will. At one extreme, the good capitalists and the friendly politicians understand the need for the presence of trade-unions in the economic system. At the other end the 'evil' employers are the cause of exploitation, strikes and concessions.

90 In a clockwise order, the first of the four quadrants represents the relation between the good capitalists and the union leaders: through negotiation and lobbying, union leaders and employers build a mutual understanding and agree on new contracts. In the second quadrant the union members benefit from the agreements and from the existence of the good employers: they show gratitude for this situation when they democratically accept the new contracts. In the third quadrant the members are the victims of the bad faith of the 'evil' employers: this is the world of losses, concessions, strikes, and of events ultimately caused by the employer. The final quadrant is the place where the union leaders fight the greedy capitalists and expose their actions in order to protect the workers. In the center of this world the court system stands as the final arbitrator.

CONCLUSION

This study focused on a textual analysis of the *AFL-CIO News*. Whatever view one takes on the validity of this approach, it would be interesting to complete this initial research with an examination of the conditions of production of the newspaper and with an analysis of the readings produced by actual audiences.

However, as the title of this paper suggests, the fundamental question is to know if ideological practices exist 'on the Left'. A practical answer would be to state that ideological practices do exist in the American trade-unions and that, as this final story shows, trade-unions are a part of mainstreaming ideological practices.

The California AFL-CIO plans to mount a legal challenge to a voter-approved initiative that would allow private industries to employ prison inmates 'Not only will public safety be endangered and jobs of law-abiding workers threatened but inmates will be put back on the streets with shortened sentences,' Henning stated.... Two current inmate labour programs...allow inmates to take reservations for a major hotel chain and for a major airline. These inmates know where the customers live, the customer credit card number and when they are leaving and returning home... (AFL-CIO, 1990c:5)

This article creates a direct connection between a social event and the worst fears of the public. Less than two years after the Willie Horton advertisement campaign, this article taps into the popular perception of prison inmates. This manoeuvre is to be expected on the Right, not inside an organization which describes itself as progressive. The structure of this story closes the text and forbids every possible interpretation of the social event that would not agree with the organizational purposes of the trade-union movement.

Barthes answers the question of left-wing ideological work by creating a distinction between an idealized left (the revolution) and the actual left. "I have been asked whether there are myths 'on the Left.' Of course, inasmuch, precisely as the Left is not the revolution. Left-wing myth supervenes precisely at the moment when revolution changes itself into 'the Left,' that is, when it accepts to wear a mask..." (Barthes, 1988:146). On this point, I agree with this statement. However, what would be the way to engage in a social practice aimed at changing the conditions of existence, without reverting to

ideological work? Is this possible or is the domination of others a fundamental characteristic of human activity? These questions open the door to a redefinition of the concept of ideology on a more relativistic perspective. Ideology should be better described not as ideas, but as practices.

NOTES

1. The *AFL-CIO News* is published by the Washington office of the AFL-CIO and describes itself as the labor movement's official newspaper. In the case of individual subscribers, the paper is delivered by mail and the cost of a one year subscription is \$10.

2. In his discussion of ideology, John B. Thompson describes the concept as "a coherent system of statements imposed on a population from above" (Thompson, 1984:63). Jim Collins states: "This notion of culture czars in master control rooms orchestrating all forms of mass culture bears a striking resemblance to the vision of the State constructed by Fritz Lang films...and Dr Mabuse, the Gambler (1922), in which virtually everything is manipulated by the evil genius Mabuse, again in a master control room with an army of eyes" (Collins, 1989:10).

92 3. In this context, the text can take various forms. At a first level, each story printed in the *AFL-CIO News* is a text which will be interpreted through the other texts (past and present) contained in the newspaper. Furthermore, it is possible to use the metaphor crafted by Paul Ricoeur (1977) and to describe as texts a series of historical circumstances that are taking place in union life: situations like strikes, economic changes, political events, trade wars, etc. "My claim is that action itself, action as meaningful, may become an object of science without losing its character of meaningfulness, through a kind of objectification similar to the fixation which occurs in writing" (Ricoeur, 1977:322).

4. On the different philosophies of the AFL and the CIO, see Stolberg (1938). For a Canadian perspective on this merger, see Lipton (1966).

5. The only exception was a photograph of a collapsed bridge.

6. Unions who chose to use different strategies will simply disappear from the history. Around 1986, the Canadian UAW disagreed with the U.S. union about the concession strategy in the auto industry. The Canadian union seceded from the American movement and staged what can be labelled as a victorious strike.

7. An advertising campaign organized by MTV during the 1992 US presidential election. The goal of the campaign was to convince young voters to register and vote.

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