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De-legitimizing labour unions:

On the metapolitical fantasies that inform discourse on striking terrorists, blackmailing the government and taking hard-working citizens hostage

by

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the de-legitimation strategies used by union critical voices in debates about union actions against Belgian austerity politics in 2014 and 2016. Based on a discourse theoretical analysis of union critical discourse in three mainstream Flemish newspapers, six sets of de-legitimation strategies that share a series of family resemblances are distinguished. These are: (1) strategies that depict unions as conservative anachronisms that are out of sync with the realities of our times; (2) strategies that psychologize and individualize 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 oppose unions to a homogenized general interest; (5) metadiscursive de-legitimation strategies that criticize unions' discursive practices; and (6) more direct metapolitical claims that question the democratic character of the unions and/or their practices. Indeed, these de-legitimation strategies link up with a broader metapolitical struggle, where the meaning of politics itself as well as the institutionalized relationships between business, government, civil society and citizens are reconfigured.

1) Introduction

Labour unions have experienced a loss of power and influence over the past few decades on a global scale due to the effects of neoliberal economic globalization (Dencik and Wilkin 2015). Belgium has not been immune to this trend. However, in contrast to unions in many other countries, and in spite of long-standing attacks on labour unions, Belgian unions continue to be relatively powerful factors. However, their legitimacy is increasingly called into question by governing parties, employers' organizations, journalists and citizens across much of the political spectrum.

Belgium is a country that has traditionally prided itself on its welfare system as well as on its culture of social consultation, concertation and compromise. The Belgian corporatist model of social consultation or concertation (Dutch: sociaal overleg) has come under serious pressure and has been declared 'dead' several times in the last couple of decades (Brepoels 2016, 576-577, 623). However, the problematization of unions by mainstream actors reached new levels of intensity. As we will see, the debates surrounding unions and their activities are not merely about the unions and what they do but touch upon the role of civil society and the nature of democratic politics in general.

This paper presents the first part of a larger discourse analysis that seeks to understand the dynamics of the debate on labour unions in Flanders. In this first contribution, we present an analysis of the strategies used to de-legitimize labour unions¹. We also show how these strategies relate to broader ideological fantasies supporting metapolitical projects that aim to reshape the face of the Flemish/Belgian public sphere along neoliberal lines. Our focus on de-legitimation strategies thus serves as an entry point into broader political issues regarding socio-economic policy and democratic politics in general.

In Flemish anti-labour union discourse the democratic process itself is being rearticulated along neoliberal lines. Critiques of union activities such as strikes should not be understood as mere attempts to protect non-striking citizens against potential inconveniences such as traffic jams or disruptions in the delivery of public services. They amount to more than pleas for limiting economic 'damage' in times of social unrest by limiting the right to strike. At stake are also the role of civil society organisations in general, a series of workers' rights, and the workings of actually existing democracy. Because of this, we will argue that the Belgian debate on labour unions is also a 'metapolitical' debate.

We understand metapolitical debates as debates that may seem to revolve around relatively concrete issues, but that ultimately revolve around a (re-)definition of what counts as a legitimate mode of doing politics. In contrast to regular debates that revolve around the control and distribution of societal resources or around the meaning of a particular norm, identity, practice or institution, metapolitical debates have the potential to restructure the

¹ Our second contribution will focus on union-sympathetic and pro-union voices - including the voices of those who offer friendly but critical advice to union members and/or their syndicates.

relationships between such discursive elements as well as to restructure the practice of doing politics itself.

The intensification of anti-union discourse needs to be seen in a context of austerity politics waged by the current right-wing Belgian government. This government was formed in 2014, and is made up of the Flemish nationalist N-VA, the Christian-democratic CD&V and the liberal OpenVLD. Labour unions have strongly resisted the socio-economic policies of this government since its formation. Previous governments have also clashed with the unions but they have not problematized the weapons and strategies that form the very backbone of union power to the same extent (Schamp 2012, 52; Brepoels 2016, 576-583).

2) Labour unions in Belgium

Belgium is a tiny dot on the map in the global restructuring of labour relations. But it is also an interesting dot. In contrast to many other countries, where neoliberal attacks have significantly weakened labour union power (Dencik and Wilkin 2015, 13), Belgian unions are still relatively strong. They have high membership numbers and continue to play a significant role in individual companies as well as in socio-economic policy-making.

Belgium has a tradition of syndical pluralism, with labour unions organised 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 FGTB/ABVV (Fédération General du Travail de Belgique / Algemeen Belgisch Vakverbond) with 1,5 million members; and the liberal CGSLB/ACLVB (Centre Général des Syndicats Libereaux de Belgique / Algemene Centrale der Liberale Vakbonden) with 290 000 members (Blackburn 2016, 41). Both have a French-speaking and a Flemish wing.

These three 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 party political stances (or party political stances have moved away from union positions) (Brepoels 2016: 621). Links between political parties and unions have become rather tenuous. And ideological motives for choosing any particular union have become increasingly less important than instrumental motives (such as the quality of the services offered by this or that union) and the simple power of habit (choosing the same union as one's parents) (Blackburn 2016; Schamp 2012, 51-52).

Belgium is one of the few countries where more than half of all wage workers are union members. Union membership is voluntary and socially acceptable to the point of being a habit for many employees. Vandaele even calls Belgium the home of the *Homo Syndicus* (Vandaele 2004, 196). The relative strength of the main unions has not changed fundamentally in recent times. In contrast with declining trade union membership across Europe, the trend in Belgium is still positive.

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, 41). Belgium can be described as a prime example of democratic corporatism (Woldendorp 1997 in Schamp 2012, 33; Van Gyes et al. 2009, 68). Unions take part in processes of social concertation at company, sectoral, intersectoral, sub-regional, regional, federal and European level.

Key to understanding the powerful influence of Belgian unions is the so-called *spill-over* effect: social and economic benefits obtained by unions automatically apply for all employees of the sectors and companies involved (Schamp 2012, 13). This obviously increases the political impact of social dialogue. Moreover, Belgian unions are not only social partners of the government, they also provide a wide range of services to their members. Among other things, they are responsible for the practical distribution of state-financed unemployment benefits in a system marked by an obligatory unemployment insurance (Vandaele 2004, 200). The relative power of Belgian labour unions thus stems from a variety of sources and not exclusively from a high level of union membership.

Like elsewhere, strikes are an important source of power for labour unions in Belgium. Strikes are permitted, even in essential public services. There are only limitations to the right to strike for armed forces, magistrates, and seamen. Labour unions and employers' representatives have agreed on pre-strike procedures (e.g. timely announcement), but so-called 'wild strikes' still occur. These are usually strongly condemned by the employers' associations, and often and also appropriated by labour unions (Blackburn 2016, 41). In 2002, a 'gentleman's agreement' between the 'social partners' urging employers to engage in social dialogue instead of pursuing back-to-work orders through civil courts was reached, but this did not always stop employer's organizations to sue strikers in times of heightened conflict (Boucké 2007, 29).

Belgian labour unions simultaneously act as worker's representatives in consultations and debates with governments and with business organisations, as policy makers, and as key actors of a broad social movement (Schamp 2012, 30). As long as unions continue to be represented in companies in the most important sectors of the economy, as long as they can execute legally established responsibilities such as the distribution of unemployment fees, and as long as there is some mode of centralized social consultation they are likely to maintain significant political power (Schamp 2012, 33).

However, unions have come under increasing pressure. At the national level, governments have increasingly pushed reforms against the will of the labour unions, thus undermining the latter's political-economic influence in spite of massive union protest (Schamp 2012, 33). Internationally, the removal of decision centres to supra-national levels of polity and economy - the so-called *jumping of scales* - has impacted negatively on union power in Belgium. Even though this does not seem to impact negatively on labour union membership, it does impact on the way unions are problematized by mainstream and right-wing voices in the debate (Devos & Humblet 2007, 3).

Unions have been on the defensive for quite some years now. In the face of a neoliberally inspired breakdown of the welfare state they have tried to defend established social rights by resisting socio-economic reforms. Their more progressive socio-economic demands have become less visible and less pronounced in the process. Unions themselves have also been forced into the defensive against trying to resist attempts to curb or break their legitimacy

and power, for example, through calls for limitations on the right to strike (Devos & Humblet 2007).

3) A discourse theoretical heuristic: political fantasies, voices and de-legitimation strategies

In order to examine how unions have been problematized in Flanders we will focus on the different strategies used to de-legitimize labour unions in mainstream newspapers. At the same time, we seek to identify the political fantasies that provide the affective and ideological basis for these strategies and their associated metapolitical projects. But before we do so it might be useful to provide a brief overview of the most important union critical voices in the debate.

The government parties most explicitly critical of labour unions are the Flemish parties N-VA and OpenVLD, and the MR - the only francophone party in the Belgian government. The N-VA is currently the strongest political force in Flanders and is the leading party in the Belgian government. It combines nationalist demands for increased Flemish autonomy with neoliberal economic views. This implies the construction of an antagonism between a right-wing hard-working Flanders and a socialist and economically weak Francophone Belgium (Maly and Zienkowski 2011, 157-158).

The Flemish liberal party OpenVLD has a long history of opposing labour unions as it considers the promotion of a 'business-friendly' climate central to its politics. The francophone liberals of the MR deliver the current Prime Minister Louis Michel. This government also includes politicians from the christian democratic CD&V. The CD&V has strong historical ties with the christian labour union ACV, but the relation between CD&V and ACV have worsened significantly, even though tries to pass itself off as the social face of the government.

The second group of union critical actors consists of business lobby organisations or 'employers' associations' (VOKA, Unizo and VBO). Even though these actors are critical of certain aspects of current government policy, they are generally supportive of the government's socio-economic policy. According to them, the labour unions obstruct necessary policy changes in the Belgian political economy.

It is crucial to stress that critique of labour unions is not limited to the abovementioned actors. The group of critics also includes social democratic politicians, journalists and public intellectuals. Even people who explicitly defend union standpoints and activities frequently articulate statements that that share family resemblances with the discourse of the union's main antagonists.

3.1) Identifying the fantasmatic political logics that inform union-critical delegitimization strategies

Our identification of de-legitimation strategies builds on the poststructuralist and post-Marxist discourse theory formulated by Laclau and Mouffe (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) as further developed by the so-called Essex school of discourse theory (see Glynos and Howarth 2007). Essex style discourse theory points our attention towards how political actors formulate political demands and bring different demands together in a more or less coherent political project; on how competing political projects interpellate citizens in different ways (by discursively construct political identities for citizens to identify with, e.g. member of the nation or worker); and on how competing political projects give different meanings to events, actors and societal phenomena in their attempts to hegemonize their views of social reality.

In order to understand how different de-legitimation strategies tie in with overarching metapolitical projects, we make use of the notion of political and fantasmatic logics². We make use of the discourse theoretical notion of logic developed by Glynos and Howarth in their *Logics of critical explanation in social and political theory*. Logics, they argue, are 'constructed and named by the analyst' in order to identify and understand the 'rules or grammar of [a] practice' under study' (Glynos and Howarth 2007 p. 136; Glynos 2008).

The identification of *political* logics is aimed at uncovering how norms, values, practices and discourses come into existence and get institutionalized, how they can be transformed and contested, as well as how their political nature fades into the background or becomes invisible. In order to identify political logics we need to grasp how subjects get interpellated, how political identities are constructed, and how collective mobilizations work. Focus is on the 'construction, defence and naturalization of new frontiers' as well as 'the processes which seek to interrupt or break up this process of drawing frontiers' (Glynos 2008: 278). This focus on drawing frontiers is central to discourse theory.

Discourse theory considers the logics of equivalence and difference to be the most fundamental political logics. The logic of equivalence involves the construction of antagonistic relationships between social identities whereby different discursive elements are made equivalent to each other by opposing them to a threatening (but simultaneously constitutive) outside (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Populist politics with their people versus elite structure are a prime example here. The logic of difference involves the structuring of identities according to hierarchy and division. The age-old practice of divide-and-rule can be taken as an example of a mode of politics in which the logic of difference becomes more dominant (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 144-145; Glynos 2008, 278).

² Glynos and Howarth also speak of social logics. The naming and the description of social logics helps the researcher to 'characterise practices in a particular social domain' (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 15). Social logics articulate rules, norms, and self-understandings that inform social practices in historically specific configurations (Glynos 2008: 278). For example, one could argue that Belgian post-WWII labour politics has been dominated by social logics of consultation or negotiation. This logic entails the operation of a set of rules (e.g. union law or informal procedures structuring consultation processes), norms and practices. Vandaele pointed out that in Belgium there is such as thing as a pro-union norm in most workplaces - union membership is almost completely normalized and positively valued in most workplace contexts (Vandaele 2004: 200). Social logics merely serve as context in this paper as our focus is on the political and fantasmatic logics that structure the discursive struggle against labour unions.

Approaching the discursive struggle between labour unions and their opponents from the perspective of political logics will draw our attention to the competing ways in which they construct the political field, to the competing interpellations of citizens by labour unions and right-wing parties, and to the ways in which they problematize and defend the welfare state, and aim to depoliticise and (re-)politicize neo-liberal politics.

Fantasmatic logics refer to the way subjects relate to the social and to the political, how they identify with certain practices, regimes or contestations. They deal with the affective dimensions of social and political reality and aim to grasp *why* social and political logics 'grip' subjects, for example through desire or enjoyment, a perspective inspired by Lacanian psychoanalysis (Glynos 2008; Glynos and Howarth 2007: 141-152; Stavrakakis 2007). Approaching labour union politics from this perspective highlights the emotional and affective dimensions of the debate on strikes and labour union politics.

Fantasy should thereby be understood in the psychoanalytical sense of the word as developed in Essex style discourse theory. The notion refers to the affective dimension of discourse that "*supports reality*" (Stavrakakis 1999: 2). In this sense, fantasy is the function of discourse which is "*not to set up an illusion that provides a subject with a false picture of the world, but to ensure that the radical contingency of social reality - and the political dimension of a practice more specifically - remains in the background*" (Glynos and Howarth 2007: 145). Glynos describes fantasy as having three main features:

"... 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, 287)

Political fantasies can support existing hegemonies but can also call new hegemonic projects into being while providing an emotional stimulus to go beyond the existing status quo. It allows actors to imagine their ideals as achievable goals and to imagine their identities as objects of desire that can be filled with concrete contents. The structure of such a fantasy implies a mode of reasoning such as 'if I only had this thing or was (like) that kind of person, I would be myself and have a full life in an ideal society'. The specific form a fantasy takes colours the mode and intensity of subjective attachments to specific norms, values, identities and institutions (Zienkowski 2016, 57-58).

Looking at the de-legitimation of labour unions from the perspective of fantasmatic logics urges us, first of all, to study fantasies about the economy. For example, it draws our attention to the way labour unions are presented as obstacles standing in the way of a well-functioning economy, and to the way the economy is presented as an objective and natural phenomenon with an agency and logic of its own. It also draws our attention to the fantasies about politics that structure the de-legitimation of labour unions. As we will see, political fantasies inform the union debate at its core. Fantasy drives the debate and tilts it to the level of metapolitics. At stake is a possible reconfiguration of a heavily institutionalized constellation of norms (including laws), values, identities, practices, institutions and their

relationships to each other. Fundamentally, the debate is not merely about unions but about the very structure of the Flemish / Belgian public sphere.

There is no one-on-one relation between (political and fantasmatic) logics and the de-legitimation strategies we identify. Political and fantasmatic logics operate throughout several de-legitimation strategies. And de-legitimation strategies usually function according to several political and fantasmatic logics at the same time. Throughout the analysis, we will draw attention to these links between de-legitimation strategies.

3.2) Data selection and the coding of voices and de-legitimation strategies

The data for this research project have been collected with the use of the GoPress database for Belgian newspaper articles. We included all Dutch language articles corresponding to either one 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, all remaining sources were then categorized according to genre, newspaper, and date of publication by means of the online CAQDAS tool Dedoose. The analysis presented below is based on 58 editorials and 54 opinion articles found within our corpus. Other genres of newspaper articles have not been included in this paper.

The corpus contains articles from one business newspaper (De Tijd), a centre right publication (De Standaard) and a more progressive centre left source (De Morgen). We have selected material for the time-spans November-December 2014 and May-June 2016. The first period is commonly designated as the 'hot fall' of 2014. It is a period of protest marked by a national manifestation against the government's austerity policies and by multiple strikes in different sectors of society. Similar to the first period, the second time-span includes a series of highly mediatized strikes. The second period is marked by a difference in strategy between Flemish and French-speaking unions. As we will see, it is a period marked by a culturalization of the discourse on strikes and by a criminalization informed by the discourse surrounding the IS terrorist attacks of March 22nd of 2016 in Brussels. All statements on unions and strikes articulated by union critical voices have been coded for voice and for (de)legitimation strategy in dedoose. Lastly, a very limited selection of articles from other sources have been added when necessary in order to understand the dynamics of the debate.

Our discourse theoretical analysis began with a coding process whereby we identified a series of de-legitimation strategies on the basis of a constructivist approach to coding (Charmaz 2006). In line with constructivist grounded theory, we do not consider coding as an objective practice of labelling whereby data speak for themselves. Instead, coding should be understood as a discursive practice of articulation whereby researchers recontextualize voices and statements produced elsewhere into narratives of their own (Zienkowski 2016, 274-278). As such, a code brings together "*ideas, thoughts and definitions in data, along with passages of text*" (Gibbs 2007, 31) with the researcher's sensitizing concepts (see

Charmaz 2006, 2008; Bowen 2006)³, research questions and sensibilities. In contrast to classical grounded theory approaches, we adopt a more constructivist (see Charmaz 2008, 402) and discursive (Gasteiger and Schneider 2014) approach to coding.

We consider every stage in the research process - from data collection to the writing of this article - in terms of acts of rearticulation (Howarth 2000 140-141; Glynos and Howarth 2007, 180-181; Zienkowski 2016, 83-90). We followed a bottom-up coding process that closely resembles the process of *in vivo* coding common in classical and constructivist perspectives in grounded theory (Saldana 2013, 91-96). *In vivo* descriptive codes were used in order to identify voices and de-legitimation strategies at a low level of abstraction. We then moved on to group these strategies into a series of axial codes that resulted in our categorisation of de-legitimation strategies found in the debate as waged in our selection of Flemish newspapers.

We thereby understand political debates as “*public intertextual networks in which actors articulate their identities in a political struggle over the functions of signifiers that fix the meanings defining the boundaries of self, politics and society*”. Debates are shifting networks in which agents use their voices as well as the voices of others in order to rearticulate and re-imagine their relationships to each other, to themselves and to the practices they are engaged in, restructuring their sense of self and politics in the process (Zienkowski 2016, 400). We therefore coded voices with a dialogic or polyphonic understanding of discourse in mind (see Roulet 2011).

A polyphonic perspective on discursive statements and subjectivity implies that the actor physically producing a statement does not necessarily overlap with the voice(s) present in the text. Through the use of reported speech, intertextuality, irony and general dialogical principles operative in all discourse, the voices of others enter explicitly and implicitly into all statements (Zienkowski 2016 144-151). Social actors engaging in political debate necessarily make use of the polyphonic features of discourse in order to recontextualize, re-frame and (mis)represent the voices of political opponents in ways that are in accordance with their own political agendas.

4) de-legitimizing labour unions in Belgium

In the remainder of this paper we lay out six families of de-legitimation strategies. These discursive strategies often work in tandem. This is not to say that we are dealing with a fully coherent anti-union discourse. Different voices criticise the unions to different degrees and deploy different arguments and strategies. But the different strategies for de-legitimising labour unions are not exclusively connected to particular voices in the debate either, but function across different voices. Indeed, the systematic reproduction of these strategies by a variety of voices, their iterability, and their high degree of compatibility suggest a powerful movement towards a hegemonization of union-critical positions in mainstream media. Union-critical voices in Flanders rarely argue explicitly in favour of dismantling labour unions completely. However, the various forms of critique do impact on union functioning and

³ This differs from Blumer’s (1954) more strictly empirical identification of sensitising concepts as concepts that originate in the empirical material.

legitimacy, and are regularly accompanied by policy recommendations that would severely limit union power.

We have identified the following six families of de-legitimation strategies: (1) reality claims and calls for realism that undermine union discourse and practice; (2) strategies of psychologization that undermine the legitimacy of the union by questioning motivations and personality features; (3) strategies of criminalization that frame unions as vandals, hostage takers and terrorists; and (4) strategies that oppose unions to the general interest and/or the will of workers, taxpayers, voters or 'the people' in general, and that re-signify class-related tensions according to culturalist, generational and neoliberal logics. We also identified: (5) metadiscursive critiques of union communication (6) metapolitical discourse that questions the legitimacy of the labour union's modes of political practice and strategy. These strategies are aimed at defining politics in a way that undermines the legitimacy of unions as democratic political actors.

4.1) The union as a conservative anachronism: claiming realism and the future

Like other discursive struggles, the political struggle against the labour unions is about making one's own definition of reality hegemonic. This goes hand in hand with explicit arguments regarding the realism and irrealism of political proposals and strategies. A first family of de-legitimation strategies attacks the unions for being unrealistic and out of sync with reality 'as it is'. The current Belgian government and the voices that back it claim the label of 'realism' for themselves and dismiss alternatives to their politics of austerity as unrealistic. Similar arguments can be found in criticisms of labour unions by journalists. The claim to see reality 'as it is' supports neoliberal political proposals as 'necessary' and 'logical'. The associated dismissal of labour union views on society and politics as 'ideological', 'unrealistic' or 'naïve', frames unions as counterproductive and even dangerous forces in society.

Of particular relevance in the de-legitimation of labour unions as unrealistic is the accusation of conservatism. *Time* plays an important role in the way critics apply the label of realism to themselves and claim that there is no alternative for austerity. Unions are frequently characterized as "*old-fashioned*" (Snoeck, 25/11/2014, DT) and strikes are seen as "*a remnant of the last century*" (Tegenbos, 12/11/2014, DS). Both the unions' political demands and their strategies are de-legitimised in this manner: unions are problematised as conservative forces, and strikes are criticised as anachronistic, "old-fashioned" (e.g. Mooijman, 25/08/2016, DS) political tools used by labour unions that are stuck in the 19th and 20th century.

The unions are considered to endanger Belgium's future because they refuse to adapt themselves to a new economic reality that requires more, not less, neoliberal reform. Neoliberal politics are thereby presented as the only realistic and future-oriented solution and as the only way to safeguard the survival of Flanders and Belgium. Lowering wages, working longer, and other socio-economic changes are presented not as ideologically inspired choices but as inevitable adaptations to the economic 'reality'. The problem is

merely that the unions do not “realize” this, as Albers editor in chief of *De Tijd* Isabel Albers writes (06/12/2014, DT).

The rejection of strikes is based on a preference for actions that do not interrupt the smooth functioning of the economy. One example of this can be found in a remarkable condemnation of labour unions by Ruben Mooijman - editor of the economics section of *De Standaard*. This editor wrote an ideal typical a mission statement for an entirely fictive labour union. A key paragraph of this fantasmatic statement reads as follows:

“The union considers strikes and interruptions of labour as old-fashioned and counter-productive methods. In today’s social structure there are enough alternative possibilities to defend the interests of their members. These include official structures for consultation, collective negotiations about wages, influencing public opinion and lobbying activities. Only in the most extreme case, if all other resources are exhausted, one can move on to actions. And in this case, we prefer actions whereby labour is not interrupted.” (Mooijman, 25/08/2016, DS).

Or as another critics puts it, *“there are more modern and cheaper instruments of protest than manifestations and strikes”* (Wambacq, 07/11/2015, DT).

The unrealistic and conservative labour unions with their anachronistic strategies are opposed to the entrepreneur as an ideal future-oriented subject. In order to illustrate this point, it is useful to take a look at the way the CEO of the direct marketing company MasterMail, Danielle Van Wesenbeeck interpellates the unions:

“Dear 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, 16/12/2014, DT)

According to Van Wesenbeeck, this cannot be done by *“criticizing the democratic process”* or *“shutting down the country”* but by *“becoming relevant”* and offering labour union members *“a future”* (Van Wesenbeeck 16/12/2014 DT).

From a fantasmatic perspective, accusations of conservatism construct labour unions and their strikes as obstacles that need to be overcome in order to realize the mythical and beatific ideal of a smoothly functioning economy and society organized by market principles. This ideal forms the horizon for neoliberal politics. Breaking the power of the unions, then, is a matter of removing that obstacle, so that this - supposedly inevitable - future can unfold itself.

The associated horrific political fantasy often takes the shape of a hyperbolic discourse that describes Belgium as a ‘failed state’ plagued by linguistic conflicts, a failing juridical system, failing security systems, and a failed culture of social consultation and negotiation (e.g. Haeck, 26/05/2015, DT). For instance, the above-mentioned CEO of MasterMail writes that if radical changes are not made soon, *“the diagnosis of Belgium as a state in decline will be unavoidable”* (Van Wesenbeeck 25/11/2014 DT). At the same time, the union’s conservatism is seen as a major obstacle for this type of change.

Political frontiers are thus drawn along a time-dimension that is often articulated together with a realism-irrealism distinction. On the one side there are unrealistic conservative labour unions and other left-wing actors defending acquired rights. On the other side, there are realistic, forward-looking pro-reform forces. The label 'conservative' is thereby used in a derogatory manner whilst being a 'modern' force of 'progress' and 'change' is considered to be inherently good. The label of conservatism problematizes union attempts to defend established worker rights. At the same time, 'change' and 'progress' are claimed by the Flemish right as its monopoly, as the N-VA's slogan 'Change for Progress' illustrates.

Some voices go as far as to claim that unions are no longer necessary at all because the social realities in which they originated no longer exist in Belgium. In this sense, the unions are considered to be "*stuck*" in a 20th or even 19th century mentality (Mooijman, 12/12/2014, DS).⁴

Not all voices attack union legitimacy directly though. Sometimes, unions seem to be urged by reluctant voices to cut their losses because their ideals - no matter how beautiful they are - are simply not realistic. But no matter how reluctant such voices are, they do frame the policy proposals of the Right as necessary and unavoidable. Albert O. Hirschman described this type of strategy as follows:

"as we know, reactionaries frequently argue as though they were in basic agreement with the lofty objectives of progressives; they 'simply' point out that 'unfortunately' things are not as likely to go as smoothly as is taken for granted by their 'naïve' adversaries." (Hirschman 1991: 151)

In some contemporary anti-union discourse, this basic agreement with lofty objectives remains, and so does the argument that things are unfortunately different and that labour unions are naïve. However, it is the labour unions' defensive attitude and general hostility to change (i.e. their resistance to the breakdown of historically acquired social and economic rights) rather than union's own proposals for change (which are indeed much less prominent in the debate) that get criticised as 'naïve', 'simple', or 'unfortunately' out of touch with contemporary economic realities. Labour union politics, it is argued, are based on a reality that no longer exists.

4.2) The psychologization of labour unions as unreasonable, irresponsible and child-like actors

The second family of de-legitimation strategies consists of attributing negative psychological properties to the unions and their members. Critics emphasize the irresponsibility and/or irrationality of union leaders and activists.

Recurring themes in the debate include accusations of stubbornness, short-sightedness, unreasonability, emotionality, infantile behaviour and delusions of *grandeur*. Some of these accusations resemble the sexist de-legitimation patterns of women's (and especially

⁴ The unions themselves articulate a mirror argument by claiming that the neoliberal policies of flexibilisation and flexicurity catapult middle class workers back to the social insecurities, inequalities and horrors of the 19th century.

feminist) political stances as infantile, irrational-emotional, or hysterical. This opposition between rational neoliberal policies and emotional/irrational resistance to such politics adds a psychological dimension to the construction of a political frontier between realistic (reform-oriented) and unrealistic (conservative) forces discussed in the previous section.

Especially strikes are de-legitimised as 'unreasonable', 'irrational', and based on emotion rather than on a realistic and rational interpretation of economic reality. The characterization of unions as unreasonable becomes very marked in 2016 under influence of a (long-lasting) wardens' strike. For example, Andreas Tirez of the liberal think tank *Liberales* writes that it is unclear to him whether the 2016 wardens' strike is "*justified or not*", but it is clear to him that "*a number of demands did miss a reasonable ground*" (Tirez, 02/06/2016, DT).

This kind of psychologisation of union behaviour can be observed much more clearly in the following editorial by editor in chief of *De Standaard* Karel Verhoeven (note also the prominent accusation of conservatism at the end):

"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 any more. 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; our underlining)

Accusations of unreasonability support attempts to limit the right to strike. Because the unions are said to have used strikes in an unreasonable and irresponsible manner, their right to strike needs to be limited for the greater good. Bart Sturtewagen, editorialist for *De Standaard*, does not shy away from dramatic vocabulary when he states that:

"If the weapon of the strike is deployed at every occasion, then we live in a society at war. Then reason will be lost and the rubble will pile up. If no agreements can be made which frame the right to strike within a liveable framework, including a minimal service, then, at some point, the rules will have to be re-written the hard way." (Sturtewagen, 12/05/2016, DS).

Closely related to the accusation of being irresponsible and unreasonable is an accusation of 'collective egoism', of securing the privileges of a small and undemocratic group of strikers against the interests of a supposedly homogenic majority population.

The idea that the unions prioritize the interests of specific groups of workers over the interests of society as a whole circulates widely. An interesting example can be found in an opinion article by christian-democratic opinion maker Marc van de Voorde:

"This wave of strikes does not suffer from a disease supposedly called politics, but

from a lethal social disease called group egoism. These actions are not a display of solidarity but of a lack thereof. The recent and current strikers do not storm the barricades for the rights of all workers but clutch onto rights of their own that other sectors don't have, and onto extra's that the majority of employees do not have access to. The myopia for their own benefits muddles the overall picture of the social question that politically alert unions should be sensitive to." (Van de Voorde, 31/05/2016, DS).

Van de Voorde continues and states that *"the left-sounding noise of the current strikes is not based on a social inspiration but rather on a capitalist reflex: my profits here, right now"*. According to this commentator, the *"short-sighted group egoism"* of striking unionists is being capitalized upon by the marxist party PVDA/PTB that is supposedly *"infiltrating the unions"*. The main point is that *"[e]xactly because strikers are not dealing with politics, they can be drawn into a political story that is not theirs"* (Van de Voorde, 31/05/2016 DS). Striking unionists are thus framed as unreflexive structural dopes that are being manipulated by a far-left political actor that seeks to destabilize the economy and ultimately the government. Van de Voorde's article exemplifies how the discourse strategy of personification through accusations of group egoism operates in tandem with a particular vision of politics:

"This way, a non-political strike does become political, but not as intended. Our unions have to practice more, not less, politics. They have to point out the general interest to their members and unions. This means: sometimes the narrow sector-related demands have to make room for the broader general well-being at the negotiation table." (Van de Voorde, 31/05/2016 DS)

The unreasonable stubbornness of a childlike union whose discourse and actions are marked by the emotional stances of a little brat are thus opposed to the general interest and to a mature and rational socio-economic policy. The union is frequently urged to act in a more adult manner. For instance, Elke Wambacq (who runs an HR company called *Dinobusters* and who wrote two books on *"dinosaurs in government"*⁵) calls for the unions to leave aside their slogans and to engage in a more constructive *"dialogue"* in the following way:

"Don't touch my index', 'A feast for the rich', or not a message at all except for a union logo. It's all meaningless. Use talents in order to engage in a dialogue, in a fun, inspiring, and positive way, instead of fencing with angry shouts that do not mean anything in the end." (Wambacq, 07/11/2014, De Tijd)

This type of metadiscursive critique regarding union communication will be discussed in greater detail later on. What interests us now is the trope of angry and emotional unions, which is omnipresent in the debate. According to the chairman of the Flemish liberal party Open VLD, critique on government policy is limited to *"shouting, exaggerating, or making trouble"* (Rutten in Reynebeau 25/08/2016 DS). And for Bart Eeckhout, editor of *De Morgen*, the choice for *"extreme actions"* and *"the preference for extreme parties"* on the left and on the right is informed by an *"emotional choice against an elite, that is in control and keeps on being in control of its business, but that does not succeed in letting all layers of the population share in this protection and prosperity"* (Eeckhout 26.05/2016).

⁵ See <https://dinobusters.org/wie-zijn-wij/>

In the end, it is emotion, and not rational argument that is seen to inform the actions of syndicalists. The de-legitimation of unions through an overarching de-legitimation strategy of infantilization is sometimes even more explicit. One of the characteristics of the ideal union described by the editor of the economics section of *De Standaard* goes as follows: “*the union communicates in a civilized, adult way and expects the same thing from its members*” (Mooijman, 28/05/2016, DS). And the above-mentioned CEO of marketing company MasterMail remarks that it sometimes seems as if she is looking at a “*carousel, without the children*” (Wesenbeeck 16/12/2014 *De Tijd*).

4.3) Criminalization of the union: vandals, hostage takers and terrorists

Some voices in the debate partake in an explicit criminalization of union actions. Most of the time, this happens when union actions involve protests whereby a minority of activists engages in a (strongly mediatized) destruction of property and/or conflict with the police. But some voices go a step further and de-legitimize legal modes of activism such as striking and peaceful protesting by pulling them into the domain of illegal activity. The third family of de-legitimization strategies thus performs a criminalizing function. As we will see, unions and unionists have been described as vandals, hostage takers, and even as terrorists. This criminalization of unions and their strategies makes union activists morally suspect and adds a moral dimension to the frontier between unions and their critics

A great deal of union critical discourse problematizes union protest from the point of view of what has been called the protest paradigm. In communication studies, this notion refers to “*a pattern of news coverage that expresses disapproval towards protests and dissent*” (Lee 2014, 2727):

“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, 2727)

Lee acknowledges that changes in the media and social environments have led to a more diverse covering of protests and that the protest paradigm should be dealt with as one variable in that shapes coverage of protests (Lee 2014, 2727; Harlow & Johnson 2011). Mainstream media coverage of strikes in Flanders cannot be reduced to the protest paradigm alone. Newspapers do provide space for labour unions and for labour-union friendly voices. But as the many examples of union-critical voices in this paper demonstrate, the protest paradigm does structure much of the discourse on union actions, especially when strikes and demonstrations are involved.

This was most prominently the case when a very successful national manifestation (120 000 people) against government policy escalated on November 6th of 2014 as members of the port’s and metallurgic unions clashed with the police. Several vehicles were destroyed and

about sixty people got injured in a highly mediatized spectacle. The violence that took place during the national manifestation of 2014 was politicised from the beginning. Union-critical voices used the violence to divert attention away from the success of the demonstration, and to de-legitimize the unions as violent or at least not able to control the violence of their members. Mainstream media coverage focused strongly on this violence. As violence came to dominate the public debate in the following days, the demands of demonstrators were pushed to the background despite the size of the largely peaceful demonstration.

Quite some journalists explicitly reflected on the relation between media, violent protest and public opinion, usually showing an awareness of the protest paradigm. But they rarely engaged in self-critique. For example, the day after the demonstration (when his paper opened with a frontpage depicting a protestor showing the middle finger to the police), Bart Eeckhout of *De Morgen* stated that “*the extensive images of violence provide opponents to dismiss the unions as being irresponsible*” (07/11/2014). And in an overview of the political year a few weeks later, journalist Jasper D’Hoore of *De Tijd* wrote that the manifestation of 120 000 unionized and nonunionized protesters in November 2014 may have proceeded quietly, the image of the entire “*hot fall*” would forever be associated with the riots that took place during the national manifestation (D’Hoore, 20/12/2014, DT). Such journalists thus formulate meta-reflections on journalism, in which (a) their own practices are lost out of sight and do not seem to be part of the type of journalism they criticize and (b) the functioning of journalism and its focus on violence, is presented as largely inevitable and objective - as a mere consequence of the violence that occurred.

The violence of union members during strikes and demonstrations continued to play a role in anti-union discourse and in media coverage of subsequent union actions. It became very prominent again when a number of prison wardens’ forcefully entered and caused damage in the Ministry of Justice in May 2016.

The protest paradigm also includes a focus on the nuisance caused by labour union actions. This nuisance is quite regularly described in criminal terms as well. For example, public transport strikes are criticised for “*taking travelers hostage all across the country*”, as an editorial in *De Tijd* put it (Albers, 28/11/2014, DT). The trope of unions ‘kidnapping’ the country or taking citizens ‘hostage’ is widely spread. Interruptions in public transport are frequently discussed in these terms. The hostage trope took on special significance during the 2016 wardens’ strike. According to a journalist of *De Morgen*, the wardens undermined any sympathy with their action by leaving prisoners to their own devices during their strike. The latter’s extreme living conditions made the striking wardens come across as a “*tough and ruthless gang*” (Muylaert, DM, 13/05/2016).

Striking itself is also discussed in terms of ‘blackmailing’, and is considered to be undemocratic. For example, Bart Maddens, a Flemish nationalist political scientist argued that “*a parliamentary majority that gives in to the blackmail of political strikes and street violence is not the apotheosis of democracy either*” (Maddens DT 06/12/2014).

The criminalisation of union politics takes its most extreme form in the course of May 2016. The terrorist attacks of March 22nd in Brussels inspired the chairman of Unizo (English: Union of Independent Entrepreneurs) to proclaim that the process of social consultation was now dead. He described the union plan of action that included a series of national strikes

and manifestations as “*an act of war*”, as a “*hostage situation*” and even described these tactics as “*practices used by terrorists*” (Belga, DeRedactie, 03/05/2016). The day after, Van Eetvelt publicly apologized for labeling union activist as terrorists, but nevertheless continued to call them hostage takers:

“Unions are no terrorists. Their political strikes do come across as hostage situations among companies though. (Van Eetvelt in Knack 04/05/2016)

In a very similar vein, in response to an unannounced railroad strike, N-VA MP Inez De Coninck argued for a minimal service “*since this country is taken hostage by union terrorists*” (De Coninck in HLN 26/05/2016). Not long thereafter, governing party N-VA quoted De Coninck in a digital flyer distributed through the party’s social media. During the *Big Strikes Debate* of May 31st 2016 broadcasted by the commercial news channel VTM, N-VA chairman Bart De Wever publicly stated that he “*stood behind*” the flyer, as well as behind the idea that unions were terrorists (see De Wever in VTM 2016).

4.4) Opposing unions to the general interest

The fourth family of de-legitimation strategies constructs an opposition between the labour unions and the general interest. Labour unions are thereby presented as egoistically defending their own interests or the interests of their members at the expense of the population and the economy at large. Proposals to limit labour union power are thus legitimized as being in the interest of the general population. The opposition between the general interest on the one hand and the unions on the other hand is discursively constructed around the following five themes: (a) economic growth and job creation; (b) nuisance caused by union actions; (c) a claim that ‘public opinion’ is homogeneously opposed to labour union strategies; (d) a rearticulation of the austerity debate as an inter-generational conflict; and (e) a rearticulation of the debate along a nationalist-culturalist Francophone / Flemish axis. All of these strategies aim to interpellate citizens, to invite them to identify with subject positions that alienate them from union interests, practices and discourses (see Althusser 1970; Zienkowski 2016, 267).

(a) Unions versus economic growth and ‘job creation’

A first way of creating an opposition between labour unions and ‘the people’ or the ‘general interest’ is to oppose labour unions to economic prosperity and growth. Economic growth understood in terms of GNP is thereby presented as being in the interest of all. For example, the steady stream of press releases of employer organizations that try to calculate the ‘costs’ of strikes and manifestations to the GNP contribute to the image of unions that act against the general interest. This ties in well with the future-oriented claims made by the proponents of austerity. The unions are seen to jeopardise the economic future of the country.

According to the parties in power, labour markets need to be ‘modernised’. For example, workers and their contracts need to become more flexible and wages need to be lowered and uncoupled from the Belgian index system that adapts wages annually to the cost of living. This is deemed to be necessary in order to remain competitive. Belgian citizens are

also asked to work more and longer in order to keep pensions affordable. As we noticed before, the unions' conservatism is seen as an obstacle for these necessary reforms.

In anti-union discourse, an opposition is created between on the one hand unions who fight for their self-interests and act out of collective egoism, and on the other hand the governing parties (N-VA, CD&V, Open VLD and MR), employers and public opinion who are willing to accept painful but necessary and future-oriented reforms for the greater good and the general interest. Union critics thus counter the class analyses and left-right discourse of the unions who claim that the government merely caters for the interests of the 1%. 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.

Strikes are frequently considered as embarrassments for Belgium as a whole. Not only are the strikes seen as costly events, they are also damaging the "*image of the country*" for multinational companies and for potential foreign investors. According to De Morgen journalist Koen Vidal, the number of strikes is even more detrimental to Belgium's international image than the 589-day no-government period of 2010-2011 that was merely "*embarrassing*" (Vidal 08/12/2016).

Unions are castigated for putting jobs at risk. Their defense of workers' rights is argued to hurt the general economy. This is why unions are accused of engaging in a counterproductive strategy that can only have perverse effects. They do not only act against the general interest, ultimately unions are said to engage in a kind of economic suicide. In order to 'create jobs', it is implied, the rights of workers need to be limited, starting with the right to strike. This explains what MasterMail CEO Danielle Van Wesenbeeck meant when she asked the unions to become more entrepreneurial and to safeguard the future of their members. The 'task' of labour unions is to "*create jobs*" by agreeing and collaborating with the neoliberal agenda proposed by the government. Norbert De Baetselier, president of the National Bank and former social-democratic politician put it as follows: "*employers and unions should not be doing politics but their jobs: creating jobs*" (De Baetselier in Michielsen 20/12/2014 DT).

In this manner the labour unions' claims to represent the interests of the working classes as well as a broader category of ordinary working people is contested. Some voices also argue that labour unions act against the interests of their own members since they threaten jobs and hurt the economy in an attempt to disarticulate union members from their unions.

(b) Nuisance caused by union actions

A second major way of juxtaposing labour unions to the general interest is by focusing on the nuisance caused by labour union actions. The nuisance frame is a very common frame in the media reports of protests worldwide. It casts protest as an irrelevant source of nuisance. Coverage that operates on the basis of the so-called nuisance paradigm shares some conceptual overlap with the protest paradigm, but:

"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, 136)

Union-critical voices systematically interpellate citizens as “*victims*” or “*hostages*” of annoying labour unions that disturb the daily routines of their life and work. This goes against the unions’ interpellation of citizens as victims of neoliberal policies that only benefit a small elite. This interpellation of citizens as victims of labour unions is especially prominent in news reports and commentaries on strikes in public services that impact on large groups of people. Train and airport strikes are extremely sensitive to the nuisance frame. Especially unexpected ‘wild’ strikes such as the strike of a small railroad union of train conductors trigger a great deal of nuisance discourse, for example when a union representing a mere hundred persons strong succeeded in shutting down large parts of the railroad network the day after an agreement by the main unions was reached.

The nuisance and economic damage frames provide powerful backing for those actors who call for a mandatory minimal service.

“The eternal hostage situation of travelers, by means of train or airplane. The way powerless people such as prisoners are left to rot. The periodic shut-down of crucial economic centres such as the Antwerp port. One cannot justify this anymore. It is unfair with respect to all the hostages who usually do not have a single tool to contribute to a solution. And it does not stand in any proportion with the annoyance triggered and the damage done.” (Sturtewagen, 12/05/2016, DS)

A minimal service would impact profoundly on union power as the power of labour unions lies - among other things - in their ability to hurt business interests and to demonstrate capital’s dependency on labour. Proposals to limit the unions’ ability to annoy and disrupt thus constitute a direct attack on union power.

(c) a homogeneous public opinion in opposition to the unions

A third way of opposing unions to the general will is the invocation of a reified and homogeneous public opinion that is unanimously opposed to union strategies such as strikes. The general public is said to bear the weight of the economic damage and the annoying disruptions caused by the unions. In this line of reasoning, strikes incite a negative public opinion *vis à vis* union demands - a claim that is usually largely unsubstantiated and seems to be based on intuition or a number of vox pop interviews.

Even union sympathizers worry that strikes may have a detrimental impact on public support for labour unions, and sometimes reluctantly argue in favour of more restrictions on the right to strike (e.g. Duyck, 26/05/2016, DS). For example, after a ‘wild’ strike of train conductors, commentator Yves Desmet of De Morgen invoked the words of former social-democratic party president and European Commissioner Karel Van Miert, who once, “*after the so maniest train strike that was difficult to explain, said that the militants did not achieve anything but to make commuters become right-wing at the platform*”. 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, 12/12/2014, DM).

The discursive construction of a union-critical public opinion is often linked with a particular conceptualisation of politics. References to a vague aggregate public opinion frequently serve to make unwarranted claims about the amount of public support that unions can or cannot count on. They thus limit the potential political impact of union demands.

Some authors even go as far as to call the unions fundamentally undemocratic organisations. For instance, N-VA politician Laurens Himpe wrote that his “*democratic heart bleeds*” when he hears union representatives say that they do not want to achieve things for their militants alone but for everyone in society:

“The union seems to stand above society as some kind of god who decides to do something for the people. And this, ‘carried’ by an absolute minority in society. Only to stop with strikes when demands are realized or when the government has fallen. This has little to do with democracy and a lot with dictatorship. You are not supposed to coerce or demand, this is what elections are for! You swipe aside the basics of democracy in a single move in order to impose the interests of a minority.” (Himpe 25/08/2016, DM)

Not many commentators are that explicit about the undemocratic character of the unions and the system in which they are embedded. Ivan Van de Cloot of the economically liberal think-tank Itinera merely asked himself whether “*things cannot be organized more efficiently, with less waste, and more advocacy of the general rather than the particular interest of some easily mobilizable group*” (Van de Cloot 11/25/2016).

The discursive strategy of depicting particular interests as opposed to a supposedly general will is one of the most common tropes in the union critical discourse under investigation. Even people who recognize union grievances as potentially legitimate concerns are frequently tempted to adopt this discourse and the associated union-critical stance. It is often suggested that the general will is in favour of more consensual or even technocratic modes of politics. For instance, Rik Torfs, the rector of the Catholic University of Leuven argued that “*striking remains a right*” but simultaneously proposed “*not to exercise*” this right during a year for the common good (Torfs, 23/05/2016, DS):

“A year without striking, even though there are good reasons to do so? The ius remains, the exercise of it is being suspended. Out of love for the general interest, whose existence we simultaneously recognize. I am convinced there are many people, professional categories, groups, who are willing to do so. Having a serious reason to strike and not doing so out of solidarity. Because we are not the beginning and the end of all things” (Torfs, 23/05/2016, DS)

In this manner, politics is narrowed down to a supposedly general interest. The only legitimate way of doing politics in this model is the mode of politics that reconciles the particular interest with the general interest by assimilating the former into the latter. This type of argument is fundamentally opposed to those rare - often academic - voices in the public debate that argue for a more conflictual understanding of politics (e.g. Huyse 25/08/2016, DM). Here, we already catch another glimpse of the metapolitics at play in the debates on the unions and their strikes (see below).

(d) Rearticulation of the austerity debate as an intergenerational conflict

Union-critical voices often use an intergenerational framework to oppose unions to the general interest and to undermine unions' claim to represent ordinary people. Whereas unionists often inscribe themselves in a left-wing social and economic logic that opposes right wing austerity politics, union critics claim that unions are risking the future of the next generation by not subscribing to the neoliberal future-oriented politics discussed above. The left-right structuring of the political field is thus replaced by a generational one that links up nicely with the forward-looking versus conservative dichotomy discussed above.

One of the main strategies for pushing labour market reforms in the recent past has been to frame reforms as a matter of intergenerational solidarity: acquired rights need to be given up in order to ensure the welfare of younger generations. An advertisement published on the advent of the 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*".⁶ Luc Coene, governor of the National Bank labelled the protesters as "*people who said fuck you to their kids*" (Coene in Wouters and Eeckhout, 06/11/2014, DM).

Calls for intergenerational solidarity can also take a more subtle and consensual form. Itinerar economist Van de Clout for example 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 at a plan for the upcoming generation*" (Van de Clout, 25/11/2014, DT). But despite this more consensual tone, those who engage in protest and conflictual modes of politics are still discredited as members of a selfish, well-off generation that leaves the mess for the next generation to clean up.

(e) A nationalist culturalization of the debate

Flemish nationalism revolves around the idea that the Belgian state brings together two nations with conflicting identities, languages and cultures. Such culturalist nationalist ideas are formulated most explicitly and most radically by the radical right Vlaams Belang and by the N-VA, but can be found across the political spectrum. Nationalist ideas can also be found in the context of the austerity and union debates. In fact, the N-VA articulates its Flemish nationalism with a right-wing socio-economic agenda. It claims to tap into a homogenous right-wing 'undercurrent' in Flanders that is diametrically opposed to the strength of the social-democrats in Wallonia (Maly 2012 308-329; Maly and Zienkowski 2011, 48-65).

At the beginning of the union protest in 2014, the union front was strong and marked by a solidarity that belied this overly homogenous picture that blatantly denies the ideological diversity in either part of the country. Nevertheless, over time, a culturalist trope that distinguished between Flemish and Walloon protesters emerged in the discourse of politicians and mainstream media. As we have remarked before, the francophone unions

⁶ The youth department of the socialist party responded with a parody of their own: "Thank you Mummy and daddy, and all of the other people who do pay taxes and are building my future" (see Belga, 24/11/2014, DeRedactie).

came to be seen as more radical than the Flemish ones. This distinction between more radical left-wing unions in Wallonia and more 'reasonable' unions in the Dutch speaking North of the country came to support the broader opposition between Flanders with its right wing 'undercurrent' on the one hand and a socialist-dominated Wallonia on the other hand.

When journalists and commentators point out that it is "*a large group of francophone wardens that stubbornly refuses to get back to work*", such statements are far from innocent (Sturtewagen 31/05/2016 DS). The culturalist-communitarian dimension of some anti-union statements can even be observed in the voices of more neutral observers who do not take strong stances in the union debate.⁷ According to Bart Sturtewagen of De Standaard, opposition leaders on the Left as well as a portion of the union leaders themselves do realise that there is a danger looming in this type of communitarian polarisation which is nevertheless informed by "*mostly French speaking union leaders who clash with current policy without reserve*" (Sturtewagen, 28/05/2016, DS). For Flemish nationalist academics such as Bart Maddens, the so-called split between French speaking and Flemish speaking unions is a mere confirmation of their point of view:

"In the end those strategic confirmations have become obsolete because of the social reality. Belgium is two countries. You could chase this fact away for a moment but then it will come back to you with full force. Or, as the [N-VA] Chairman of the Chamber usually says: 'reality is our ally'. Rarely, this communitarian reality shows 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, and a different constellation. The far left is way more important there, and so on. (Maddens 01/06/2016 DS)

4.5) The metadiscursive dimension of the debate: criticizing union communication

Large-scale social and political debates always involve a metadiscursive dimension. If political debate is understood as a discursive struggle between and over the resources, voices and discourses of competing actors, it is paramount to consider the way actors use discourse in order to (de-) legitimize the statements articulated in political debate. A great deal of political debate is language about language, discourse about discourse, or communication about communication, depending on the terminology one favours (Blommaert 2005, 253; Verschueren 2004; Zienkowski 2013, 2014, 2016).

Through metadiscursive statements, social actors try to guide each other into preferred modes of interpretation and understanding. The way union statements and communicative events are labelled impacts directly on union identity and should therefore be taken into

⁷ Other commentators and experts on labour union history critically analyze the Flemish nationalist strategy of culturalization. For instance, Historian Jaak Brepoels pointed out that a statement such as "Walloons love strikes like the Spaniards love bull fights" already appeared in anti-union political pamphlets of 1913. After a short historical overview of the communitarian dimension of the Belgian labour movement, he concludes that whoever wants to frame the current wave of protests as a communitarian issue is doing so because of his own political agenda (Brepoels, 25/05/2016, DM).

account. Unions are accused of lying and disinformation, of communicating badly, of not having any answers, of exaggerating the problems, and of using polarising language.

There is a strong metadiscursive dimension to anti-union discourse as it involves criticism of strikes as a communicative acts and of the forms of communication associated with strikes and demonstrations. Above we already touched upon the supposedly friendly advice that unions should give up on the outdated strategy of striking and organizing mass demonstrations. Instead they should come up with more contemporary and less disturbing strategies of action and communication. A clear example can be found in an opinion article by Elke Wambacq, of Dinobusters (see above).

Wambacq considers union slogans to be “*meaningless*”. In her article, she suggests that “*instead of fencing with angry shouts dat 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*”. This way, “*you avoid a lot of people in one place*” (Wambacq 07/11/2014, DT). This last statement is part and parcel of the widely spread *nuisance* frame discussed above. It is also an example of the blatant misrecognition of how strikes and demonstrations are about power by numbers, and about impact through nuisance and economic damage.

Unions are frequently blamed for engaging in demagogy and accused of spreading “*half-truths*” “*lies*” (e.g. Parys, 16/12/2016, DS; Himpe, 16/12/2016, DM; Rutten in Reynebeau 12/11/2014), mostly by politicians of the ruling government parties against whom the labour unions protest. And in his depiction of the ideal labour union, the editor of the economics section of De Standaard Ruben Mooijman dreams of “*a union that does not engage in provocative language use, demagogy or twisting the truth*” (Mooijman, 28/05/2016, DS). It should not come as a surprise that the actors involved in the debate accuse each other of lies and half-truths, for this is key to undermining the legitimacy of political opponents.

4.6) Metapolitical de-legitimation strategies: are unions democratic actors?

It may be useful to make a distinction between metapolitical discourse and metapolitical struggle. Metapolitical struggles include all forms of action that contribute to a reconfiguration of the dominant modes of doing politics. Metapolitical discourse refers only to discourse that reflects on the legitimacy of particular modes of political practice and discourse. Metapolitical discourse is very prominent in criticisms of labour unions since a great deal of union critical discourse is discourse about what politics is (not) and should (not) be. It frequently involves statements on political responsibility and a normative reflection on what social actors should be practicing what sort of politics.

Two main metapolitical problematizations can be distinguished in union critical discourse: (a) a focus on the primacy of the political and on the role civil society actors are allowed to play in democratic process of consultation and concertation; and (b) the tension between conflict-oriented and consensus-oriented modes of practicing democratic politics.

(a) The primacy of the political and unions as undemocratic actors

Most of the labour union protest during the periods under study was aimed against government policies that threatened established socio-economic rights, benefit schemes, and public services. As we saw before, many actors - government parties, employers' organizations, journalists and other citizens - criticized many aspects of union discourses and practices. Some of these critiques go beyond negative evaluations of union views and standpoints and pose a direct metapolitical challenge to the union's' right to protest in the very name of democracy itself. This line of attack can be clearly observed in talk about 'the primacy of politics' and in the accusation of unions engaging in 'political strikes'.

According to N-VA chairman Bart De Wever the strikes of 2014 were "*the most political strikes ever*" (De Wever in Van de Velden, 20/12/2014, DT). De Wever was not alone with this accusation. For instance, the ex-chairman of the liberal union ACLVB accused the francophone unions of "*practicing politics*". In such cases, Vercamst argues, "*strikers are being taken advantage of for political purposes*". In the case of the 2016 situation in Wallonia, he specifies that far-left voices are thus "*trying to cause the government to fall*" (Vercamst in D'Hoore, 03/06/2016, DT). And as we saw before, De Wever considers these francophone political strikes to be the work of puppet master PS (Parti Socialiste). Moreover, N-VA politicians consider unions to be undemocratic actors who do not abide by what they call 'the primacy of politics' (Dutch: *Het primaat van de politiek*).

The 'primacy of the political' refers to the idea that it is the elected government who decides in situations of conflict.⁸ This principle does not fit well with the culture of consultation and concertation in which the unions are embedded. Unions are criticised as undemocratic because they do not respect the policies of a democratically elected government. Democracy is thereby reduced to elections and democratic legitimacy is determined by percentage of the vote. In this manner, the legitimacy of labour unions as a non-parliamentary political actor is severely undermined.

(b) de-legitimizing conflict as a democratic mode of doing politics

The second metapolitical problematization of union practices and discourses challenges unions on the basis of a particular political fantasy of politics as consensual. Unions are frequently accused of polarizing the debate. For example, De Standaards' Guy Tegenbos writes that strikes would not bring the "*desired corrections [of government policy] one step closer*" and would delay the social negotiations for weeks (Tegenbos, 20/11/2014, DS). Others point out that the "*tone of the debate*" quickly hardened. Bart Brinckman even begs to be delivered from "*the heralds who pour oil onto the fire in the hopes to benefit from this themselves*" (Brinckman, 15/12/2014, DS).

⁸ This view on the primacy of politics has nothing to do with what is meant by the primacy of the political in the context of Essex style discourse theory. Quite the contrary. For Essex authors the primacy of politics is the general ontological principle that says that all meanings, identities, norms, values, practices and institutions are inherently contingent constructions. At their basis lie normative political decisions that fade from conscious consideration into the background of our everyday lives. The general idea is that in principle, anything can be contested and politicised through practices of rearticulation (see Torfing 1999).

Such metadiscursive commentaries on the tone of the debate and on the voices of the unions (and their opponents) are indicative of a preference for a consensus-oriented mode of doing politics. Union critics thus often blame the unions for operating on the basis of a conflict oriented approach to politics. In the manifesto of his ideal-typical union, Ruben Mooijman of De Standaard dreams of a union that operates on the basis of a more harmonic world view:

“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, 28/05/2016, DS)

Further on, he takes the German *Mittbestimmung* model as a prime example of a good practice (Mooijman, 28/05/2016, DS). Likewise, 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*”. The mythical politics of the future are conflict-free and frictionless modes of practice that leave little room for conflict. For some voices, there seems to be a direct correlation between democracy and conflict. The less conflict there is, the more democracy there must be.

Such attitudes and arguments are in part connected to the specific Belgian socio-economic consensus model in which employers’ organisations and labour unions come together as ‘social partners’ to negotiate wage policies and the likes. However, such statements misrecognize that this corporatist democratic model has always been characterised by an inherent tension between polarisation and consensus and by inherently conflicting interests. Moreover, it misses the point that the conflict and nuisance unions can cause is exactly the kind of bargaining power they can bring to the negotiating table.

A preference for consensus and a dismissal of polarisation is frequently connected to a consensual view of the economy and a homogenous understanding of the national-popular will: the idea that economic growth (defined as a growing BNP that supposedly leads to ‘job creation’) is in the interest of everyone. If economic growth is in the interest of everyone, than all societal actors – including labour unions – should work together to create this growth. So they should not ‘polarise’ or enter into a ‘logic of conflict’ that juxtaposes business interests to the interests of the government and the workers. It is in this sense that the unions, as De Batselier said, should do “*their jobs: creating jobs*” (De Batselier in Michielsen 20/12/2014 DT).

5) Conclusion: the metapolitics of the debate on unionism in Belgium

In this paper, we have identified six families of de-legitimation strategies that are infused by a political logic that problematizes labour unions in Flanders: (1) strategies that depict unions

as conservative anachronisms that are out of sync with the realities of our times; (2) strategies that psychologize and individualize 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 and nationalistically defined general interest; (5) metapragmatic de-legitimation strategies that criticize union identity by means of a criticism of union discursive practices; and (6) more direct metapolitical claims that question the democratic character of the unions and/or their practices.

This focus on de-legitimation strategies has served as an entry point for an analysis of the structure of the discursive struggle against labour unions. The discussion of these de-legitimation strategies has allowed us to identify some of the major political and fantasmatic logics that structure this struggle. We have discussed the kinds of interpellations of citizens that invite citizens to identify with neoliberal political projects and that attempt to disarticulate them from labour union projects or prevent that they would identify with labour unions. And we have discussed how these are connected to the restructurings of the political field that undermine the labour unions' left-right politics.

Our focus on the fantasmatic dimension of union critical stances has shown how a fantasy of a smoothly functioning and conflict-free capitalist economy underlies many of the de-legitimation strategies involved. The fantastic construction of an unavoidable and natural economy that is free of politics underpins several families of de-legitimation strategies that depict unions as conservative, emotional, irrational, criminal, childish and polarizing actors. This way, an image of politics emerges where, at best, the social-democratic role of labour unions is limited to negotiating the executive modalities of decisions made by the government and by an economy which is attributed with an agency of its own. It is the government and the economy alone who decide what 'needs to be done'. This fantasy thus represents a complete overturn the corporatist democratic model that has characterized Belgian labour politics for decades.

The debate on unions and strikes is therefore fundamentally a metapolitical debate. We are dealing with a debate whose relevance of which is not limited to a discussion unions and strikes. The debate is more fundamentally about the nature of politics, about what actors have the legitimacy to act politically, and about how labour relationships should be organized and by whom. The de-legitimation strategies we have identified directly attack or indirectly undermine historically established socio-political configuration of relationships between state, capital and labour in Belgium. Certain strategies are relatively explicit and de-legitimize unions by questioning their democratic legitimacy as extra-parliamentary civil society actors who unnecessarily polarize the debate. But one could also argue that the entire struggle against labour union positions, practices and discourses is fundamentally metapolitical. The discursive struggle about the place of labour unions and strikes is not merely a struggle over isolated institutions or social practices. It is a debate whose outcome may lead to a reconfiguration of an entire society. The political fantasies that inform union critical statements tilt the debate to the level of metapolitics.

In one way, one might argue that the political fantasies underlying attempts to limit labour union power are based on an a-political or anti-political concept of the economy, whereby the economy is seen as having an agency of its own and as developing in manners that are

(or should be) out of reach of political actors. Neoliberal politics, in this sense, revolves around the (partly rhetorical and partly real) removal of political power from the hands of politics. At the same time, such a reconfiguration of economic politics constitutes a fundamental political act that de-legitimises the agency of some (especially labour unions) at the expense of the agency of others (right-wing political parties and the lobbyists of employers' organizations who are both presented as 'acting on behalf of the economy').

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