Taming Labour in Neo-Liberal Ontario:
Oppositional Political Communication
in a Time of “Crisis”

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Abstract: This paper examines the key legitimating role of communication and the media, and the role of taming-labour, in constructing the Ontario neo-liberal hegemonic project in 1995. Media-content analysis and examination of the communication strategies of the Ontario government in the 1996 public-service strike show that the government relied on constructing the perception of a hegemonic crisis and framing labour as oppositional to the public interest of resolving the crisis. The government’s general strategy of quick-attack communications offensives curtailed media and opposition scrutiny, increasing the likelihood of policy success and media dependence on its framing of issues. A strong challenge to the government led by labour and social justice groups failed in the face of state public relations, media silence, and internal dissension. Examination of a second strike in 2002 suggests that even without a crisis, the government continued its attack on labour.

Keywords: Labour; Political communication; Crisis communication; Government communication; Days of Action

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In 1995, the Progressive Conservative Party, under the leadership of Mike Harris, regained power in Ontario. Once the strongest political force in Canada’s second-largest and most populous province with a record 34 straight years in power, the party had spent a decade in opposition, losing two elections to different parties. The Conservative Party that won the election of 1995, however, was not the same middle-of-the-road party that had been turfed from power. Instead, it was a renewed and reconstructed party with an ideological mission to restructure state–citizen relations. This neo-liberal hegemonic project borrowed heavily from the experiences of its sister parties in Great Britain and New Zealand and was influenced by the policies of its geographical neighbour, the United States.

This article examines the key legitimating role of communication and the media, and the role of labour-taming, in constructing the neo-liberal hegemonic project in Ontario and confirms that the legitimating strategies of the Ontario neo-liberal hegemony to establish and maintain consent have impacts on political communication. In the Conservative government’s first two and a half years in power, however, resistance to it was sufficiently strong and the government sufficiently ideological in its approach that it faced a crisis of authority and risked losing its legitimacy at a transitional time that is vulnerable to counterhegemonic struggle (Gramsci, 1971; Robinson, 1996). Ultimately, the strongest counterhegemonic challenge to the Ontario government, a coalition of labour and social movements that organized ongoing “Days of Action” around the province, was unable to develop and sustain its challenge, while the government drew on the legitimating apparatus of the state to regain legitimacy and control.

This article focuses specifically on the attempts by the new government to tame labour in keeping with neo-liberal imperatives followed successfully by the governments of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. According to the New Right’s suggested order of neo-liberal restructuring (Williamson, 1994) and the experiences of other neo-liberal governments analyzed by Savoie (1994) and Schwartz (1997), one of the first targets of a new neo-liberal government is public-sector unions. A pared-back public service meets both symbolic and material goals by providing a government with budget savings, the appearance of decisive action, and a warning to other challengers. As a strategic first point of attack, labour thus has a central position in neo-liberal political projects. It can be said that without taming labour, there is no neo-liberal project and, further, without effective political communication to structure meaning and gain consent, labour cannot be tamed.

The article uses as case studies the public-service strike of 1996, eight months into the Conservative mandate, and a subsequent strike in 2002. Where examination of the first strike considers that the Conservative government targeted labour as a critical component of its hegemonic project, examination of the second strike, which took place in the consolidation phase of the Conservative project, asks whether the ideological and communicative conditions were any different after the so-called crisis had passed.
Prior to the election of the Conservatives in 1995, the changing political economy of Toronto and Canada contributed to the perceived necessity of getting the economy under control by lowering labour costs. Toronto is Canada’s largest city, its centre for international finance and business, and its “undisputed financial and commercial services centre” (Todd, 1995, p. 196). In 1995, 42 of 56 foreign banks, half of Canada’s largest insurers, and half of the largest Canadian corporations had head offices in the city. Beginning in the 1980s, globalization and free-trade agreements put strong pressure on the province’s industrial manufacturing base and encroached on Ontario’s economic stability (Bradford, 1998). Any state restructuring project thus would need to address the omnipresent issue of labour costs and their effect on domestic and international competitiveness. In addition, the new government needed to have a negotiated settlement with its public-service union before the end of the fiscal year in order to meet its publicly stated cutback target (Ibbitson, 1997).

The Conservatives utilized political communications processes adeptly to win consent for their hegemonic project. They moved swiftly to centralize and control information and communications in government and in the legislature (Brearton, 2003). The communications strategies used so effectively by the Conservatives in their election campaigns—“centralized control of simple messages, extensive pre-writ campaigning, heavy reliance on targeted television advertising, the use of ‘hot button’ or wedge issues to polarize the electorate” (Fletcher, 1999, p. 1)—carried over into communications policies and processes structured inside the government’s communications operations and became part of an extensive campaign of ongoing persuasion to win consent.

This campaign extended to media management. Governments are both dependent on and dominate the social production of news in a mutually reinforcing relationship with the media. A novice government, such as that in Ontario in 1995, that seeks to shape a new economic and social reality must rely heavily on news-making processes. The ability of governments to dominate media agendas is aided by the huge growth in resources focused on public relations that persuade the public, instead of traditional government communications efforts that merely inform them.

The case study draws on Hall and Jacques (1984) and Hall (1988) and the concept of crisis; Knight (1998, 2001) on media frames and labour; and Williams’ (1977) concepts of dominant, alternative, and oppositional meaning systems.

Government strategies of political communication rely on constructing the perception of a hegemonic crisis in the polity that needed to be addressed and of framing labour narrowly as oppositional to the public interest of resolving the crisis. In the short term, most advanced capitalist states are resilient in the face of immediate economic and social crises and can adjust and accommodate them as needed (Habermas, 1975). The crisis can emanate from a current situation or event and requires a defensive, tactical response to resolve it. In contrast, a truly hegemonic or organic crisis is a “critical juncture in a country’s history when consensus collapses” (Bradford, 1999, p. 21); this form of crisis requires a process or
shift in the economic and political distribution of power (Gill, 1988). A hegemonic crisis involves “a struggle to create a new balance of political forces, requiring a reshaping of state institutions as well as the formation of new ideologies” (Simon, 1982, p. 38). Crucial to the New Right war of position waged against the prevailing Keynesian paradigm in the 1970s and 1980s was the co-optation of hegemonic crisis from a specific national situation in Britain in 1979 to a universalized concept of crisis as any general political threat to state stability. As Hall (1988) and others point out, even when there is no crisis, one can be manufactured for political purposes (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978; Williamson, 1994). The Ontario Conservatives, in the manner of the New Right, skillfully used the threat of economic and moral crisis to manufacture “the necessary and sufficient conditions” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 178) to begin this shift in ideologies and build a new hegemony.

At the national level in Canada, the business lobby made an authoritative and successful case for the threat of crisis posed to the economy by too much debt. A preconditioned federal environment of deficit crisis was taken up by the Ontario Conservatives as a pretext to restructure and redefine the province economically and socially. Government communications strategies and messages relied on the discourse of debt to convey the seriousness of a crisis, fix it as “truth,” and frame it as a debt issue (Workman, 1999). This discourse was based on the repeated message, borrowed from Thatcherism, that “there is no alternative” to widespread economic and social reform.

In Ontario, the discourse of crisis was used to justify an ongoing communications offensive or “blitzkrieg” (Easton, 1994, p. 171) to sell a package of policies integral to the government’s agenda. The blitzkrieg metaphor itself captures the sense, “not of public communication at all, but virtually an act of war with associated propaganda” (Atkinson, 1994, p. 195). The offensive started immediately after the Conservatives were elected and did not abate for two and a half years. Within that period, there were separate blitzkriegs linked to specific cases, but the overall strategy was “hit hard, hit fast, don’t blink” (Douglas, 1993), to confuse and overwhelm the opposition and the media.

Public-sector workers were natural targets because of their poor public image. Most public knowledge of unions is confined to isolated media reports on strike activity. Knight (2001) and others have noted that traditional news frames and scripts for labour strikes centre primarily on the self-interest and demands of the strikers; the disruption, inconvenience, and harm caused by the strike; and disunity within the union itself. The self-interest frame of strikers as “motivated by a narrow-minded concern for [their] own sectional interest” contrasts with their government employer as “motivated, in a non-sectarian way, by concern for the ‘national interest’” (Morley, 1976, pp. 250-251). The disruption frame demonstrates the emerging and broader strategy of the Ontario government in limiting opposition to its policies. The disruption frame and polarized discourse of labour strife already reinforces an image of strikers that locates them near the edge of the acceptable limits of society. Corporate and political interests are displaced into
the common sense, and counterdiscourse, which in any event stays within the terms of the dominant discourse (Phillips, 1996) and remains distant from substantive economic questions (Knight, 1998). The disunity frame contributes to an image of strikers as an unruly mob unable to act rationally.

Williams (1973, 1977) distinguishes among dominant, alternative, and oppositional meaning systems. The dominant meaning system is the “central system of practices, meanings and values” (1973, p. 9) in a society that has “continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified” (1977, p. 112). At the same time, it is “continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged” (p. 122) by alternative forces, which struggle with the dominant meaning system but can be “accommodated and tolerated” (1973, p. 10). It is also challenged by oppositional or counterhegemonic forces, which struggle outside the hegemony to transform it (1977).

Emergent meaning systems are in constant movement, uneven and incomplete (Williams, 1977), and social subjects “can be ‘won’ to a new conception of themselves and society” (Hall, 1988, p. 10). As part of the hegemonic apparatus of society, the media help to reproduce the dominant values and meanings, but they too are subject to the continuous struggle for meaning from non-dominant sources, as hegemony by definition is always dominant, but never total or exclusive (Mercer, 1980; Williams, 1977).

Traditionally within Canadian consensual politics, organized labour held a dual position in both the dominant and alternative meaning systems. By virtue of its collective power and large institutional size, it held a place as a dominant social actor at the national table. But, by virtue of its power to disrupt through collective labour action, it also played an alternative role as an actor testing the limits of tolerance within society. This changed federally in Canada in the 1990s as a consequence of ongoing state retrenchment and anti-labour legislation that closed down traditional avenues of negotiation and compromise (Panitch & Swartz, 1993), marginalizing and shifting labour away from sites of power and its place as a dominant social actor. In Ontario, the government’s rejection of consensual politics in favour of confrontational politics was reinforced through its rhetorical tactic of referring to those who opposed it as special interests. In contrast, the government’s supporters represented the dis-interested who, through universalization or identity replacement, get to speak on behalf of society (Knight, 1998; Thompson, 1990). This created a more competitive public environment “where interests hurl themselves against each other until the most powerful prevails” (Ibbotson, 1997, p. 285). The competition for access—either to government or the media—and the polarization that emanates from dividing citizens into the “worthy” and “unworthy” (Hermer & Mosher, 2002, p. 13) shifted legitimate alternative voices simplistically into oppositional ones. In this way, union members, urban Toronto residents, parents, and teachers—anyone who challenged the government—were all characterized as special interests or radicals. As oppositional groups by definition do not have regularized relations with either government or media, they must rely on disruptive rather than “accredited access” (Hall et al., 1978, p. 58) to bring their point of view to a larger public, which marginal-
izes them further and reinforces the disruption media frame. In effect, the govern-
ment treated all challengers to its policies as if they were strikers. Visible, single-
issue opposition such as the public-sector strike and the government’s communi-
cations and policy responses to it gave the government the opportunity to demon-
strate to the general public that it was defending the public interest (Noel, 1997).

The public-sector strike, 1996
The first-ever strike by Ontario provincial government employees, the 1996
Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) strike, followed months of
upheaval resulting from a quick series of legislative and policy actions undertaken
by the new government. Anti-labour legislation passed prior to the strike was
intended to weaken the union and its ability to organize a successful strike. Instead of bargaining, the government applied for conciliation, hoping to force the
union to acquiesce quickly so that layoffs could begin and it could meet its expen-
diture targets and get on with its restructuring agenda (Ibbotson, 1997; Walkom,
1997). Facing up to 25,000 layoffs from its ranks of 67,000, the union instead
made the choice to defend its members and went on strike February 26, 1996.

OPSEU was not alone in its opposition to the government’s agenda. In par-
ticular, the strategy by organized labour and social justice groups to hold “Days of
Action” in cities around the province contributed to an environment of protest. In
all, 11 such events were held throughout the province over a period of three years.
The actions drew crowds of up to 100,000—with an exceptional 250,000 in
Toronto—and closed down to different degrees the day-to-day operations of the
cities chosen for the actions (Turk, 1997). Opposition was broadened symboli-
cally beyond labour when labour began to co-chair the organizing committee for
each protest day with a local group from the Coalition for Social Justice.

The turning point in the strike was a violent altercation March 18, 1996, at the
Ontario legislature, televised across the country, at which the Ontario Provincial
Police riot squad clubbed and pepper-sprayed peaceful strikers and other pro-
esters as Members of Provincial Parliament) stepped over fallen strikers to get
into the legislature. The government, perhaps in realization that “a negative image
was being created both at home and abroad of a government unable to manage its
own workforce, of a government dominated by labour unrest” (Walkom, 1996,
p. A1), went back to the bargaining table. The strike ended March 31, after five weeks.

OPSEU’s pre-strike communications strategy was to build credibility with its
members and the public. It also built morale by encouraging its members to par-
participate in the ongoing Days of Action in order to feel part of a broader anti-Harris
opposition and feed into its “culture of resistance” (Rapaport, 1999, p. 56). By the
time union members went on strike, they had a growing sense that they were
acting on behalf of Ontarians, with a large element of public opinion behind them.

Extensive polling and advertising informed the government’s communi-
cations strategy. Its messages were captured in remarks made by Premier Mike
Harris to the media: “We promised to deliver the Common Sense Revolution. No
special-interest group or lobby will stop us. No union-leader-led demonstration
will deter us” (Rusk, 1996, p. A4). Its media strategy was to limit media access to
staged opportunities only, which channelled the government’s messages more directly to the public. Message pickup was aided by a media blackout on bargaining that meant media coverage was dependent on that institutional accommodation.

Given the socially constructed antagonistic nature of a strike, it follows that media coverage would reflect polarized points of view from the two main actors, and this was indeed the case with the media coverage of this strike. Media-content analysis was conducted on all the daily coverage of the three main Toronto newspapers: *The Globe and Mail*, *The Toronto Star*, and *The Toronto Sun*. The content analysis is limited by using print media in Toronto only and excluding media outside Toronto and electronic media. That being identified, it should be kept in mind that Toronto is the political capital of Ontario and generates substantial political coverage. In addition, it is the major media market for all of Ontario, and its media directly service 38% of the province’s population.

The three daily newspapers referenced high-level government actors and union leadership together in 66.1% of media stories relating to the strike (see Table 1). Other actors did not enter into the coverage in a substantive way. The analysis showed significant use of authoritative actors as primary definers of an issue (Hall et al., 1978), but also revealed the contestation that can exist within source categories (Schlesinger, 1989). Major government and union actors maintained message coherence in the coverage, while secondary social actors such as Conservative Members of Provincial Parliament and rank-and-file union members expressed anxiety and indecision as the high-profile strike unfolded.

Coverage of the strike was intense, with the three dailies together producing an average of 5.8 stories per day for the duration of the 34-day strike, 76% of them in the first eight pages of the newspapers. The altercation at the legislature provided the only substantive news and was the subject of a high degree of media interest; coverage of the altercation mostly portrayed the union in a negative light. In a polarized debate such as this, the agenda-setting and agenda-building power of the government through its messaging is considerable. The media allowed the government to set the agenda, repeating its message that it was standing its ground in order to resolve the deficit problem. Messages on fairness and public inconvenience were secondary to the main ideological message of the fight against the deficit. Both union and government sought to appear co-operative and reasonable, but in media stories the union message seemed strident in its emphasis on not backing down, while the same message from the government seemed instead to show leadership.

The government and the union played out their standard roles in labour conflict. The media, primed for the traditional frames of labour–government politics, missed the larger agenda-building of both the government (as part of a remaking of its relationship with labour) and challengers (through the Days of Action). The lack of media coverage linking the strike to other instances of resistance to the government bears this out.

It was generally accepted by the government and the media that the union did not gain anything from the strike, as the government was able to continue with its
restructuring agenda (Ibbitson, 1997). OPSEU’s victory was that it was able to keep its first strike going at full pace, mobilizing and politicizing its large membership and delaying the layoffs. Eventually, however, 11,000 public employees quietly lost their jobs. In terms of taming labour, the strike was fought mostly on symbolic ground, with both sides hoping to achieve strategic victories on the

Table 1: Proportional Presence and Disposition of Political Actors in Media Coverage on the OPSEU Strikes, 1996 and 2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party Political Actors</th>
<th>Proportional Presence in all news items, 1996</th>
<th>Proportional Presence in all news items, 2002</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provincial government</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Premier &amp; lead ministers</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>27.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Other Conservative politicians</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provincial political opposition</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provincial Speaker</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provincial government spokesperson</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-total</strong></td>
<td>35.0</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Party Political Actors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Union leadership</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>24.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Other unions</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Individual members</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-total</strong></td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>32.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public actors &amp; groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Supporters</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Challengers</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academics &amp; experts</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private sector/business</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawyers/courts</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General public</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inmates</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misc.</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub-total</strong></td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>30.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>97.4</td>
<td>99.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Consolidated news coverage in Globe and Mail, Toronto Star and Toronto Sun by percentage. Numbers relate to hard news items that focussed primarily on the strike. Proportional presence refers to the frequency of appearance of the actor in the news item with each reference counted.
broader public issue of government policy. A *Globe and Mail* editorial said “this strike . . . has evolved into a symbolic battle between labour and Tories over the size and role of government, a contrast over competing views of society . . .” (*The Globe and Mail*, 1996, p. A14). As Wolfsfeld (2003) points out, however, symbolic battles are difficult for the media to frame, and this was a struggle between the government and the union over two competing visions of society. According to Wolfsfeld, “the rhetoric of antagonists . . . is more symbolic,” while “the news media are interested in current affairs, not ideology” (p. 89).

In this first test against a well-organized opposition, the Ontario government relied on a public environment conditioned by the federal government’s discourse of debt reduction, which it then magnified with its own rhetoric of crisis. When added to the structural and policy changes the government made, this created sufficient public and media confusion to allow the government to continue to act decisively on multiple, strategically chosen policy fronts. Public employees were perceived as yet another special-interest group with too much power to divert the government from what needed to be done for the public good and that therefore needed to be disciplined. The media’s news judgments were conditioned by primary definition and institutional accommodation that further favoured the government’s position. One additional element—the absence in media coverage of contextual reports on the Days of Action—also helped the government.

**The Days of Action and resistance**

Wolfsfeld’s contention that symbolic battles are hard for the media to frame offers one rationale as to why there was so little media interest in the Days of Action. Organizing the actions was a conscious strategy by labour and social groups to build a counterhegemonic social movement against the government. The actions attempted to move resistance away from the perceived self-interest of opposition toward the organization of a “collective political expression of workers’ groups and other progressive political organizations that could have a more sustained impact on what Gramsci called ‘civil society’” (Munro, 1997, p. 127). The eventual goal was understood to be a general province-wide strike.

Although the protest days were considered a success organizationally, tensions within organized labour and the social justice groups were evident immediately, as a classic cleavage emerged on how to fight the government (Turk, 1997). The split revolved around two schools of thought. One view was that change was only possible through the construction of a social-based movement. The other view was that “social change only comes through the ballot box” (Turk, 1997, p. 173). Because of this internal dissension, the umbrella body for the province’s unions limited its financial support after the first action. For the Metro Network for Social Justice, with its almost 250 member organizations, a conflict existed as well over its role in movement politics, which some felt would come at the expense of “meaningful debate over vision, strategy and organization” (Conway, 2000, p. 44). The conflict between competing notions of how to build and achieve counterhegemony proved insurmountable, and the action days, although they continued, did not culminate in the expected province-wide political protest.
For the first action, media coverage was national, but by the second action, a media search shows that most coverage was isolated to the city where the action took place (Macleod, 1999; Mittelstaedt & Rusk, 1996). The *Toronto Star* mentioned the actions in North Bay (the premier’s hometown) and Windsor, and there was some interest in the Hamilton action, as it coincided with a Conservative Party convention. Overall, however, there was no sustained effort to report on or explain the actions, and most of the slim coverage took the form of predominantly negative commentaries and editorials (especially in the *Sun*).

The sole media report that referred to a “fledgling social movement” was in *The Globe and Mail* at the time of the Toronto actions, when 250,000 people took to the streets over two days of protest (Mittelstaedt & Rusk, 1996, p. A6). This report was notable because it was unique in providing context for the action taking place, using expert opinion and quoting the position of the challenger leaders. At the same time, it suggested that the Toronto action was “organized primarily by unions,” ignoring its own quotations from leaders of the action that hinted at a broader challenge to the government.

Virtually the only general media coverage (again, much of it negative) was when labour first indicated it would move toward a province-wide strike (Mackie, 1997) and when it decided eventually not to go ahead. Curiously, the latter decision prompted a *Toronto Star* report that called it “the most under-reported story of the past week” (Urquhart, 1998, p. A17).

Although one Day of Action directly preceded the public-service strike and another followed it, and both received substantial local coverage, media reports of these actions did not extend into coverage of the strike itself, which then appeared isolated and unconnected with any larger frame of general opposition. Primed for the traditional labour–government frames, the media missed the larger agenda-building of both parties. Thus, although a counterdiscourse was nominally present in media coverage, it was in the form of “scattered facts” and did not “construct an equally salient argument” against the dominant discourse (Entman, 1993, p. 57).

The media silence on the Days of Action echoed the silence of the government. The Conservatives’ communications strategy, with few exceptions, was to ignore the existence of the single biggest organized and sustained resistance to their hegemony. As one analyst put it, whether vociferous protest or passive acceptance, the union opposition had almost no effect on the government agenda; in the huge Toronto action and all the others, “the Harris government let protestors blow off some steam and quietly went back to governing the province on Monday morning as if nothing had happened” (Brushett, 2004, p. 9).

The media, in turn, did not pursue the story, creating a perverted primary definition through the absence of coverage and allowing the government free rein. This speaks to the depth of pre-existing labour frames, which are dependent on the traditional lack of public support for strikes. It also speaks to the confidence of the government that its discourse of deficit reduction had penetrated public and media consciousness sufficiently to have meaning prior to the strike (Hansen & Murdock, 1985; Knight, 2001). A contributing factor was the government’s blitzkrieg
communications strategies, which were designed to keep the media off-balance and dependent on institutional accommodation. Thus at a critical moment, in the Gramscian sense, in the transition from one paradigm to another, the main Toronto print media were silent and were thus complicit in upholding the government’s agenda and the dominant framing of labour and protest.

For their part, pushed by the government’s latest anti-labour bill (Bill 136, which would give government the ability to restrict the right to strike, bypass independent arbitration, and impose first contracts), the labour organizers of the Days of Action met at an emergency conference in July 1997 and decided on a plan of escalating action that could lead to a province-wide strike that fall. When the government amended the bill, labour tacitly agreed to withdraw or at least postpone the strike threat (Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations, 1997) and instead held further city-based Days of Action. The actions petered out over the next year and labour quietly decided not to pursue the strike option (Urquhart, 1998).

**Strike redux: The struggle continues?**

From the evidence of the 1996 strike and the failure of the Days of Action, it appears the Conservatives successfully marginalized labour as oppositional and tamed it. Aided by the “disjointed and episodic” Days of Action strategy and the media silence surrounding the protests, the Conservatives won re-election in 2000 with a reduced majority (Rose, 2005, p. 528).

An examination of the second public service strike in 2002, however, told a different story.

At first glance, media-content analysis of the second strike showed a considerably less-charged environment. The level of media coverage in the three main Toronto daily newspapers was half that of the 1996 strike and the number of news items per day dropped from 5.8 per day in 1996 to 2.3 in 2002. While in 1996 the strike story had played out overwhelmingly on the front pages (76.1% of coverage), in 2002 only half did (49.5%). In 1996, the three newspapers provided ample commentary and editorials, but only one editorial appeared (in the Sun) in 2002. Unlike the 1996 strike, in which the premier and lead government ministers were prominent, they did not have a huge presence in the overall coverage in 2002, and government backbenchers and partisan political opposition were not mentioned at all. Instead, a new category of social actor, the government spokesperson, emerged, with a proportional presence of 8.3% in media coverage (see Table 2). This category was not even calculated in the 1996 analysis. The use of a non-political spokesperson from the public-service ranks of communications officers was partly due to the concurrent leadership race to replace Premier Harris (another indication that the ideological offensive of the previous seven years was ending), partly because the legislature was not sitting, and partly because the strike was not as noticeable to Ontarians because essential-service agreements kept the province’s services running relatively smoothly. It was also an indication that a more low-key strategy, in which a high-level spokesperson was not needed, was in play. In contrast, union president Leah Casselman received more media
play in 2002 than she did in 1996. While the police are often a feature of strike reporting (with 9.4% proportional coverage in 1996; see Table 1), there was no equivalent to the 1996 riot, and the police had minimal presence in 2002 (at 1.8%).

Table 2: Proportional Presence of Political Actors in Media Coverage on the OPSEU Strike (March 13, 2002 – May 2, 2002)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party Political Actors</th>
<th>Globe &amp; Mail 27 stories</th>
<th>Toronto Star 41 stories</th>
<th>Toronto Sun 38 stories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provincial government:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Premier(s)/Ministers</td>
<td>84 (44.7%)</td>
<td>52 (17.2%)</td>
<td>47 (25.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Other Cons politicians</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prov political opposition</td>
<td>5 (2.7%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>5 (2.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provincial Speaker</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prov govt spokespersons</td>
<td>6 (3.2%)</td>
<td>29 (9.6%)</td>
<td>21 (11.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-total</td>
<td>90 (50.6%)</td>
<td>81 (28.8%)</td>
<td>73 (39.3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Party Political Actors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Union leadership</td>
<td>49 (26.1%)</td>
<td>62 (20.5%)</td>
<td>57 (30.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Other unions</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>7 (2.3%)</td>
<td>1 (0.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Individ members/essential</td>
<td>7 (3.7%)</td>
<td>23 (7.6%)</td>
<td>16 (8.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-total</td>
<td>56 (29.8%)</td>
<td>92 (30.4%)</td>
<td>74 (39.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public actors &amp; groups</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Challengers</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Supporters</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academics &amp; doctors</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>16 (5.3%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private sector/business</td>
<td>15 (8.0%)</td>
<td>25 (8.3%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lawyers/courts</td>
<td>11 (5.9%)</td>
<td>38 (12.5%)</td>
<td>5 (2.7%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>8 (2.6%)</td>
<td>4 (2.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General public</td>
<td>2 (1.1%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inmates</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>12 (4.0%)</td>
<td>6 (3.2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>2 (1.1%)</td>
<td>13 (4.3%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misc.</td>
<td>7 (3.7%)</td>
<td>18 (5.9%)</td>
<td>24 (12.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-total</td>
<td>37 (19.8%)</td>
<td>130 (31.9%)</td>
<td>39 (21.0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>188 (100.2%)</td>
<td>303 (100.1%)</td>
<td>186 (100.2%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: By media outlet - by number of references and percentage.

An examination of the 2002 coverage of the three newspapers separately also indicated patterns in keeping with expectations based on their ideological profiles.
The Globe and Mail, as a newspaper of record, focused on official sources, primarily the premier and lead ministers, at 44.7% of references (see Table 2). This is more concentrated than in 1996, when the Globe also gave space to the secondary tier of official actors: academics and experts, the private sector and business, and police. In contrast, The Toronto Star, the liberal metro-oriented newspaper, spread its 2002 coverage around, decreasing its coverage of politicians, slightly increasing its coverage of union leaders, and devoting 26.1% of references to the secondary tier of actors (see Table 1). The populist tabloid Toronto Sun substantially increased its references to union leadership, but it did not seek out the rank and file, indicating it was not looking for union disunity as it had in 1996. More than the other two papers, the Sun’s coverage was polarized between the upper levels of government and union. Altogether, the 2002 coverage indicated a loosening up of the constraints imposed by the crisis in 1996. Although primary definition was adhered to, the three newspapers, if anything, demonstrated the freedom to act as usual and not to seek third-party validation (as the Globe had in 1996), or just as carefully give equal coverage to government and union actors (as the Star had in 1996), or look to disruption, chaos, and violence (as the Sun had in 1996).

Media frames in 2002 also differed from those in 1996. The coverage from all three newspapers provided little evidence of disunity within the ranks of the major actors, which was in abundance in coverage of the crisis days. More importantly, discourse related to the economy and the deficit, the primary message and rationale in the earlier strike, also was absent. Instead, the traditional disruption and delay frame was in high evidence. This is a clearer indication that the crisis conditions of 1996 were over. Again, this points to a more relaxed political and media environment.

Only one small shift in the focus of media coverage pointed to a different interpretation and a continued effort on the part of the Conservative government to target the union as oppositional actor. This shift was in the increase in the amount of coverage related to lawyers and the courts (from 2.1% to 8.0% proportional presence; see Table 1). It might have gone unnoticed if not for the many references in the media stories to essential services. From this, it appeared that the government’s 2002 strategy was targeted at the courts, as it filed hundreds of injunctions against alleged union violations of the essential-services agreement. According to OPSEU, its own strategy was oriented to accommodate responses to injunctions (Robinson, 2005).

In the union’s view, the 2002 strike was just as ideologically charged as the previous one. Through its negotiators, the government took a hard-line position at the bargaining table, and, through its managers across the public service who made daily reports, it was “every bit as vicious” on the ground level (Robinson, 2005). In addition, the union suggests that the government provoked the 2002 strike by putting the pension plan on the bargaining table, knowing that the union would never budge on this bedrock labour issue. The strength of the union’s commitment and continued ability to fight the government can be seen in its high
strike vote. At 88% in favour of a strike, it was 21% higher than its strike vote in the uncertain crisis days of 1996.

Yet, due to a media blackout agreed to by both sides, none of this appeared in the media coverage. Instead, the media concentrated on the only strike-related events available to them to cover without the key government politicians available: court appearances and prison disruptions, both attributable to what OPSEU spokesperson Randy Robinson calls the “internal strike” inside the workplace that was based on the government’s repeated attempts to broaden the meaning and extent of essential services (Robinson, 2005). In contrast, the 1996 strike focused externally, on the picket line.

In other words, discursively the strike had the appearance of having reverted to a more traditional and less charged labour action, and this was reflected in media coverage, but within a media blackout, the government channelled its anti-labour stance through its bargaining team while it concentrated on choosing a new leader. In the false calm of media silence and the internal strike, the strike lasted seven weeks, two weeks longer than the 1996 crisis-driven strike.

Discussion
This paper began with the argument that the Ontario government that took power in 1995 launched a restructuring project aimed at taming labour as the lynchpin of its neo-liberal political project, a project that could only be successful with the force of communications behind it. Measuring the success or failure of such a structural offensive and the collective action that opposes it requires a complex matrix of financial, institutional, and political factors (Reshef & Rastin, 2003). Although the bottom line may be that OPSEU and the rest of organized labour in Ontario were unable either to bring down the government or persuade the public to take their side, Brushett (2004) points to the experience gained by labour and social advocacy groups, the strengthened ties between them, and the “sense of accomplishment and solidarity” across the unions engaged in the struggle against the government (p. 8). This is echoed by Robinson, who says OPSEU “has 10 years of skills that could never have been built in ‘peacetime’ . . . [We have] a much more politicized membership [and] we haven’t thrown away the tools that got us there” (Robinson, 2005). In addition, Rose (2005) suggests that the “length and breadth of union collective actions—strikes, protests, and electoral strategies—may have contributed, in some way, to the eventual change in government” (p. 530).

What is clear is that overall union density, which varies markedly by province, is lowest in Alberta and Ontario, the provinces in which neo-liberalism was strongest (Work Network of Canadian Policy Research Networks, 2004). But public-sector union density in Ontario, at 67.2%, has changed little since 1995 (Statistics Canada, 2004), and it is in the private sector that unionism has declined, from 19.4% to 17.4% (Kidd, 2005). On the other hand, in terms of any future collective activity to challenge state hegemony in Ontario, the “workplace activism” that labour encourages as a lesson learned from the failed Days of Action (Egan, 2004, p. 3), if it exists, is not linked to broader social justice efforts. A current
labour campaign to restore public services and rebuild strong communities does not extend to its Days of Action partners (CUPE Ontario, 2005; Robinson, 2005). In addition, despite a stable economy and a change in government (in 2003), Ontario unions have not caught up on wages lost during the Conservative assault (Rose, 2005).

The case of labour restructuring in Ontario and the challenges to it reveals some of the processes, limits, opportunities, and successes in structuring and legitimating consent for the state, particularly in times of crisis in an emergent hegemony. State policy was aided by bureaucratic communications operations that were and are increasingly geared to persuasion and legitimation that privilege the government in power. Routinized media operations echoed bureaucratic structures, ignored the symbolic battle of a building counterhegemonic movement, and privileged the dominant meaning system. The increasing importance of persuasion techniques such as advertising and public-opinion research coincided with the commercial logic of media institutions, which have an interest in maintaining the status quo and have the power to construct and reflect preferred meanings.

The Conservative government that came to power in 1995 demonized public outcry against its political project as self-interested and radical at a time of crisis, shifting challengers into Williams’ oppositional meaning system. It also used its electoral majority to pass controversial legislation swiftly to avoid media and opposition scrutiny, thus increasing the likelihood of media dependence on the government’s framing of issues and decreasing the likelihood of opposition. The blitzkrieg and other pre-emptive tactics, such as government information management, increased the government’s chances of policy success. The media, too, were caught in the communications offensives, which made it difficult for them to assess the government’s massive legislative and policy assault. In the case of the 1996 strike, the media were also hampered by their own pre-framing (Hansen & Murdock, 1985; Knight, 2001), which further benefited the government’s agenda by not reporting substantively on the Days of Action.

Conclusion
Deacon and Golding (1994) have written that the “power to create and distribute meaning still resides with centres of material and political power”; however, they add, “this power is exercised dynamically. It is fought over, challenged, and abused, both within and without” (p. 203). While the extent of organized and resourced resistance is a factor in government policy success or failure, the Conservatives were successful in strengthening their material and symbolic power to limit the challenge.

Challengers to a hegemony lack the resources to respond to the kind of ideological communications offensives and media management that are a hallmark of neo-liberal communications. Most unions, however, understand “the importance of the communication infrastructure to successful collective action . . . and then convert[ing] it into an organizational campaign of collective protest” (Reshef & Rastin, 2003, pp. 47-48). OPSEU’s self-acknowledged strength and focus is on internal member communications (Robinson, 2005). By the time of the 2005
round of bargaining with the new government, which was resolved without resorting to a strike, attention to membership communications had created a knowledgeable, politicized cadre of “member-mobilizers who organized information meetings and kept sustained pressure on [politicians]” (Ontario Public Service Employees Union, 2004, p. 1).

The ability of labour to survive in an era of de-collectivization may depend on going beyond only using the traditional tool of mass protest to include microstrategies that build public trust and force media attention on non-traditional areas of action. An example would be the recent campaign by the Ottawa and District Labour Council to promote awareness of a lost piece of labour history, the work of anonymous Irish and French immigrant labourers who built the Rideau Canal. As a result of the council’s work, a Celtic cross memorial now stands by the canal, and Ottawa City Council has endorsed the project, in which school children also have been involved (Ottawa and District Labour Council, 2002). Above all, the project helps to insert awareness of labour back into the life experience of the public and contributes to bringing labour back from the oppositional margins theorized by Williams. The path ahead, however, will still be rugged; few reporters are assigned to a now-almost-defunct labour beat, and the best interest of media owners does not lie in increasing labour consciousness among their employees or the public. To counter this, the development and use of alternative media, especially media projects in which labour and social justice groups can work together, could play a decisive role.

Yet even with that understanding of the uneven playing field in which they then interacted and continue to operate, the decision of labour and social justice groups not to hold a province-wide strike should still be considered a lost opportunity to capitalize on the “negotiations over meaning” in which they had been participating, unequally, but with some success (Phillips, 1996, p. 214).

Taming labour may not have been as uncomplicated as the Conservatives believed, but the struggle for control of Ontario was always as much symbolic as it was material. OPSEU survived the crisis with a smaller but much more politicized membership, but the government survived as well. In the end, the Conservative government won the short-term ideological battle against OPSEU and labour with the help of a silent media and an absent public. As the second strike shows, however, underneath the public-relations war, both government and labour are wiser in the ways of communicating for hegemony, but labour relations is still the “plain old battle” (Robinson, 2005) it always was, and a union may only be as strong as the government allows it to be. As the president of the Ontario Federation of Labour said in his 2005 Labour Day message, “[g]overnments come and go and working people have to fight for some basic workplace rights over and over again . . . The work is never done” (OFL, 2005, p. 1). Further, without the building of a Gramscian war of position used so successfully by the Conservatives in their neo-liberal project, labour in a time of crisis will continue to be vulnerable to the forces that seek to tame it.
Notes
1. The legislation allowed replacement workers (“scabs”) during strikes, removed successor rights, made it easier to decertify a union, required a vote before certification, weakened pension rights, and diluted the power of arbitration (Glasbeek, 1996; Rapaport, 1999). Successor rights allow a union in a workplace that comes under new management to retain the union and its collective agreement.

2. The government’s strike and communications strategy were reconstructed from media reports, interviews, and other published accounts of the strike. All reports point to the government’s lack of preparedness for sustained opposition. A request made under the Ontario Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FOIPPA) was denied, due to legislative changes made by the government in its first months in office that excluded from the act records relating to labour relations and employment-related matters. OPSEU (2002) claims the government spent $250 million on advertising between 1995 and 2002, seven of its eight years in office. In the 2002 strike, the government spent $3.1 million on advertising, while in contrast, OPSEU spent $930,000. Advertising costs for the 1996 strike are unavailable, due to FOIPPA restrictions.

3. An after-the-fact news report indicates that the Harris government strategized that protest would help its re-election chances: “As we saw in 1999 when they started protesting like this and you get the people with the funny hair coming out and protesting . . . it’s not necessarily a bad thing,” according to one Conservative campaign manager (Lindgren, 2000). This confirms that silence was indeed a strategic tool of the government.

Interview
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