

Media disdain for union rights

Strikers' voices ignored

It seems that despite strikes being legal in South Africa, the media does not appreciate this right. **Janeske Botes** takes a look at newspaper reporting of the recent public sector strike and concludes that its negative stories swayed public opinion against strikers, demeaned women workers, failed to give relevant information and ensured strikers were voiceless.

'Strike chaos: babies starve, patients die'
'Terror as striking teachers rampage'
'SA tops list of protest nations'
'Oh Lord, make the strike end soon!'
'Babies die... and the greed goes on!'
'State threatens illegal strikers'
'Time to stop this destructive cycle'

One could be forgiven for assuming the above headlines are taken from a tabloid newspaper – sensational and dramatic. They could even come from the foreign media, after noting some of the generally negative trends in reporting on South Africa during the World Cup. In fact, these headlines are taken from a range of local newspapers, not only tabloid. The 2010 public service strike is the focus here, and it is obvious that the media and union protest do not have a comfortable relationship.

These headlines come from the *Daily Sun* (the most read newspaper in the country), *The Times* and the *Business Day* newspapers. All three publications have solid circulation rates and appeal to a wide range of citizens, often targeted according to class distinctions.

The *Daily Sun*, also known as 'The People's Paper', caters for the lower to middle classes, whereas *The Times*, despite being cheaper, caters for the middle to upper classes. *Business Day* mainly appeals to the upper to middle classes. With such broad reach, overall, these newspapers hold tremendous power in affecting, and perhaps even swaying public opinion on stories with a political connection.

The 2010 public service strike was one such story. Members of various Cosatu-affiliated unions (Congress of South African Trade Unions) took to the streets for nearly three weeks, and the media duly covered the event. However, just as the 2007 strike was widely misrepresented by the media, so too was last year's strike action.

All three newspapers selected

stories and images that leaned towards the negative, and focused almost only upon the impact of the strike on the public, while ignoring the actual reasons for the strike action.

The *Daily Sun* featured front-page images of empty classrooms, learners teaching each other, people being 'rejected' from hospitals, and even went so far as to run an image of a group of people praying 'for deliverance from industrial action' in the Eastern Cape.

Strikers were rarely interviewed in any of the newspapers' coverage, but were asked personally by the papers' editors to stop striking. Victims of the strike and government spokespeople were the most common narrators of the action.

Notably, women received very little opportunity to speak on the strike. The most emphasised female representation during this time, and one which my students even initiated a conversation on, was front page coverage of a Nehawu (National Education Health & Allied Workers Union) striker who allegedly required four policemen 'to wrestle her into a

cop van'. The bold headline was 'It happens when a women gets REALLY angry! Strike a Rock!'

By making a story out of this, female strikers are seen as being something of a spectacle.

This is further emphasised when noting a clear undercurrent of disdain for female strikers, especially as the majority of them were teachers or healthcare practitioners. Both these fields presumably require caring, benevolent people, which the women strikers clearly were not. Thus, media coverage of the strike action was not only blatantly negative, but also played on many cultural and gender stereotypes in constructing a message for the audience.

The Times initially displayed support for the strike, with a front page editorial encouraging fair pay for civil servants. However, they soon shifted gears and were running daily collective pages dedicated to the strike. Sombre stories of families affected by the striking hospital workers, and learners struggling to manage the workload of matric filled these pages. Lack of access to ARVs and other chronic medication also featured prominently, and, as was also seen in the *Daily Sun*, large images of strikers toyi-toying, placards in hand, were used to counter the suffering of the public.

This was best demonstrated, of course, when *The Times* started focusing almost exclusively on the deaths of babies, in particular, in hospitals countrywide as a result of the strike. The paper made use of the familiar line of 'Your country needs YOU!' to encourage readers to volunteer their time at hospitals. The overwhelming sentiment questioned how so-called service providers, care workers, especially, could be dancing around with messages aimed at Zuma (sometimes even held upside down), while children and people were dying?

Once again, the voice of the strikers, particularly female strikers, was not present.

The *Business Day* did not bother itself too much with the strike, except to note what economic impact the three-week Cosatu-affiliated strike would have. This was framed in sharp contrast to the economic boost South Africa saw during the World Cup a month or so before.

Large images of strikers featured often, with Zwelinzima Vavi, Cosatu general secretary, also receiving much focus. Again, the strikers seemed to remain silent. Union spokespeople were often quoted, but this was in response to what government had said. This very clearly places the strikers at a disadvantage, as the government and other so-called experts become the narrators of the action, and the strikers mere spectators.

In reality, it was the other way around, but the media, and particularly *Business Day*, painted it conversely.

ASSESSMENT

These brief assessments of newspaper coverage highlight a number of problems.

Firstly, and somewhat obviously, is that union-driven strikes are not understood as legitimate events by the mainstream media. Strikers were further delegitimised by having their voices ignored. Government spokespeople were the primary commentators, with Vavi, union spokespeople and strike 'victims' forming the rest of the commentary pool. The following must be asked: How can union members' concerns be taken seriously when they are painted as an overall nuisance?

This delegitimation extends to creating an unsupportive public. These three newspapers are a mere cross-section of the bigger reporting trend perpetuated by the country's mainstream media. The way the media constructs such an

event has a major impact on the public's level of support for the action. If the stories and images depicting the strike are negative, with no mainstream media channel presenting an alternate viewpoint, then the public will presumably find the strike annoying, and most unnecessary.

Besides, South Africa is already 'alive with strike action', as a cartoon by Jeremy Nell in *The Times* proclaimed, so what is another strike going to achieve? No change will happen while strikers annoy South African citizens. A dialogue should be started, and issues dealt with in a methodical manner. Of course, had the media actually spoken to strikers, then the media would have learnt that dialogue had already been attempted with government, but yielded no results.

The likelihood of successful change for union members is greatly compromised by the media's delegitimation of their concerns. Without public support, their concerns will not be taken seriously.

While unions have started combating those issues by producing their own media, it is not always reaching the right people, nor, the right number of people. Despite embracing new media technologies such as Facebook and Twitter, and sending out smses, emails and press releases with relevant information and updates, it is crucial to note that the mainstream media still wields the most power when painting the unions, their interests and their concerns to the public. This 'relationship' needs to be revised urgently if future change, and mobilisation of mass public support, is to be secured. ¹⁸

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