ONE WAY STREET: A CASE STUDY OF THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER AND PHILADELPHIA DAILY NEWS COVERAGE CONCERNING THE 2009 SEPTA STRIKE

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by
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ABSTRACT

Labor scholars have examined the claim of negative media bias towards labor unions. In an attempt to substantiate these claims, a case study of the Philadelphia Inquirer and Philadelphia Daily News was conducted examining their coverage of a November 2009 public sector labor union strike. Articles from both papers running between March and November 2009 were examined. It was found that there was an overwhelming tone of negative labor coverage in hard news and opinion content. It was also found that both papers, jointly owned, provide little diversity in coverage, and was overtly homogenous in their coverage of the strike.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

As the events of 2010 in Wisconsin and Ohio have shown, organized labor is still a very important and divisive part of the American political landscape. The legislative showdown in Madison (and to a lesser extent Columbus) over the right of public sector unions to exist and enforce collective bargaining agreements brought organized labor into the national media spotlight in a way that it has not been for quite some time. As a result of this new (yet also old) argument over organized labor and its usefulness to the American public, it is imperative to examine how the media cover, discuss and frame organized labor.

This thesis will discuss organized labor and its relationship to the news media. Through a specific case study of newspaper coverage of a 2009 strike in Philadelphia, I will show how the mainstream American news media can take a decidedly negative view of organized labor and its interests. Within this same example, I will also demonstrate how news media consolidation and joint ownership has led to a lesser availability of diverse opinions and thorough debate of matters of public interest – union issues included. To illustrate this, the case study will present a brief recent financial history of two papers (The Philadelphia Daily News and the Philadelphia Inquirer), then through detailed content analysis demonstrate how these two papers gave the same style of negative coverage with virtually no variety of opinion or information regarding the strike. On a macro scale, these two factors have created a large hurdle for organized labor – that of getting balanced information, or even an accurate telling of their side of a given issue – into the public forum, therefore discussion and study of these factors is of practical
importance. Before I present the case study, however, I will first present a literature review of the news media’s treatment of organized labor, and some of the reasons why this type of coverage may be occurring.
Chapter 2: Previous Research of Negative Labor Coverage In the Media

Perhaps the most thorough exploration of labor and its negative media image is Puette’s 1992 book *Through Jaundiced Eyes – How the Media View Organized Labor*. In the book, Puette analyzes how organized labor is portrayed in film, television dramas, newspapers and broadcast news. In each media genre, Puette finds decidedly negative traits associated with the portrayals. For example, in Hollywood films and broadcast television shows, Puette describes, through plot descriptions and dialogue quotations, how Hollywood films show one overarching theme in their portrayal of the labor movement (with some, but few exceptions) – corruption and ties to organized crime. (1) After citing dozens of examples, Puette succinctly illustrates the point by juxtaposing the stories (and fates) of two Hollywood films with union themes during the McCarthy Era - *On the Waterfront* (1954) and *Salt of the Earth* (1954). *Salt of the Earth* was a decidedly pro-union film that shows worker struggles and discrimination from their point of view. The film was censored and suppressed for over ten years (only playing on twelve movie screens in a two-week period upon initial release), and the film’s director and screenwriter were subsequently blacklisted due to perceived “pro-labor communist sympathies” contained within the film. *On the Waterfront*, on the other hand, portrays union leaders and members as corrupt, violent, and connected to organized crime – thus portraying workers’ struggles in a one-sided negative light. The film won multiple awards, and is considered to be a “Hollywood classic.” The film’s director, Elia Kazan, went before the House Un-American Activities Committee and assisted in “naming names” of supposedly pro-Communist Hollywood writers and directors and held on to a storied Hollywood career, directing other well known films such as *A Streetcar Named*
Desire (1951) and East of Eden (1955). In stark contrast, Herbert Biberman, director of Salt of the Earth, spent six months in jail after being blacklisted, and only made two independent films (Salt of the Earth and Slaves (1969)) after his blacklist. In summarizing which film had more of an impact in most future Hollywood portrayals of labor unions, Puette states “Over the years, On the Waterfront would be copied and imitated with different places, names and industries, but always emphasizing union corruption, as if it were a new idea and as if the problem was endemic.” (2)

When Puette turns to examine news, similar themes of negative connotations are found in print and broadcast news stories depicting organized labor. He illustrates these through multiple coverage/content case studies of strike actions and organizing campaigns. In analyzing the stories, Puette presents Parenti’s seven traits of media coverage of organized labor (traits I will draw heavily upon in presenting my case study):

1. Portrayal of labor struggles as senseless, avoidable contests created by union’s unwillingness to negotiate in good faith.
2. Focus on company wage "offers" omitting or underplaying reference to take-backs, and employee grievances, making the workers appear irrational, greedy and self-destructive.
3. No coverage given to management salaries, bonuses or compensation and how they are inconsistent with concessions demanded by workers.
4. Emphasis on the impact rather than the causes of strikes, laying the blame for the strike totally on the union and detailing the damage the strike does to the economy and public weal.
5. Failure to consider the harm caused to the workers' interests if they were to give up the strike.
6. Unwillingness or inability to cover stories of union solidarity and mutual support.
7. Portrayal of the government (including the courts and police) as a neutral arbiter upholding the public interests when it is rather protecting corporate properties and body guarding strike-breakers. (3)
These seven traits are in one way or another reinforced in other studies. Bruno examined 552 news stories concerning organized labor in the Chicago Tribune from 1991-2001 and found that 56.7% of those stories portrayed unions in a negative way, while 36.8% were found to be positive and 6.8% to be neutral, based on his study’s codification of key phrases within the articles. Bruno concluded, “Applying a multivariable, quantitative content analysis of labor reporting in the Chicago Tribune confirmed organized labor’s anecdotal complaints about the paper. The study demonstrated that the paper largely establishes a negative tone in covering the labor movement.” (4) Martin studied the 1997 Teamsters strike against United Parcel Service (UPS). In examining media coverage of the strike, Martin found that the news media attempted to frame the story in the typical negative union/pro-consumer, pro-businesses stereotypes from the start of strike. When public opinion poll showed citizens siding with the union,¹ the media gradually changed the frame to some extent, but quickly reverted back to the same old anti-union rhetoric once the strike was concluded. Martin observed:

Many observers hailed the Teamster’s victory as a victory for all of labor and a milestone that would mark labor’s resurgence. Yet for the corporate news media, any levity that might be associated with broad public support for the Teamsters and a possible upswing in fortunes for working people was strongly tempered with worry about corporate America’s bottom line. Clearly, the profits of Wall Street got the final word on whether anyone beyond the Teamsters should be pleased by the UPS settlement. (5)

¹ Ironically, Martin suggests the reason for the Teamsters’ success in swaying public opinion in their favor hinged on an aggressive campaign that focused on how the strike was affecting consumers negatively, and how UPS was keeping their employees from being able to be participants in the economy with better wages (Teamsters workers being consumers themselves).
Some research has also attempted to explore non-strike related labor issues, and how labor is always framed within how cooperative it is with the ownership class and the capitalist system. In these media frames, the interests of the ownership class are positively reinforced in stark contrast to those of labor. Oshagan and Martin examined the frames employed in news coverage of General Motors (GM) deciding to close one of their manufacturing plants in Willow Run, Michigan, or Arlington, Texas (both plants having unionized workforces through the United Auto Workers Union or UAW). They found in examining four newspapers\(^2\) over a two year period the story was newsworthy, given that:

**GM’s position is both well represented and given prominence. GM’s point of view has more mentions in general (219 vs. 132 for UAW), and in the lead paragraph (51 vs. 12 for UAW). While the UAW is quoted as often as GM (49 vs. 50 for the UAW), GM’s position is significantly more often mentioned within a story (83 vs. 58 for UAW).** (6)

Furthermore, the results of examining the frames in the study concluded:

**In characterizing the two sides GM is nearly twice as likely to enjoy a positive than a negative frame (53 vs. 28). The most common positive frame used with GM is that of a progressive corporation (48 out of 53), while its most negative frame is that of a greedy organization (22 out of 28). The common negative frame used to explain the behavior of the UAW is that of a stubborn, inflexible and conflict oriented organization (23 out of 28). While the UAW is often cast within negative frames as a stubborn, inflexible menace to GM, it is also portrayed with positive frames, but only insofar as it accedes to GM’s shutdown plans with flexibility, reasonability and efficiency. Overall, while the union’s positive and negative frames are evenly split, (26 vs. 28), management clearly receives a more positive frame (53 vs. 28).** (7)

There has also been some research examining labor related issues and their perceived lack of coverage, another way in which the news media presents a decidedly pro-corporate, pro-business, pro-consumer frame. Carreiro studied the coverage (or lack

\(\text{Detroit News, New York Times (local edition), USA Today, Dallas Morning News}\)
thereof) of employers who fired employees for engaging in union organizing activity.

Carreiro examined this by accessing National Labor Relations Board complaints that were filed by unions on behalf of workers who were fired for union activity, and then cross-indexed a random sample of them to examine media coverage of the filings. Carreiro found that the media routinely ignore such cases:

... anti-union firings are overwhelmingly ignored in the local, regional, and national newspapers. Of the one hundred randomly chosen cases from 1999, only two received newspaper coverage. Of the seventy-one cases of anti-union firings that went before the Board in 1999, that is, those cases that were fully adjudicated, only nine received newspaper coverage in the 121 local, regional, and national newspapers searched. (8)

By choosing to present labor news this way, the news media props up the business/management sides of a given issue while undermining or presenting the union’s position in a negative way. While many of the aforementioned examples show this in operational practicality, there is some necessary discussion of causation as well - why exactly does the news media present an inherently (whether intentional or unintentional) negative portrayal of organized labor as the research suggests? Perhaps the most inherent reason for such negative and sparse coverage of organized labor and its key issues is the basic idea that the American mainstream news media uses a for profit, capitalist business model itself as an entity. The main objective of the ownership/management class in a capitalist system is to maximize profit margins through increased consumption and decreased costs. These goals are opposite the interests of union members and organized labor, as safety standards, overtime rules, paid vacation/sick time and better wages are all things that cut into profit margins and increase costs to business. The news media is in a unique position where it needs to report on this dichotomy while simultaneously engaging in it operationally. This can create a conflict of interest that leads to a pro-
business tilt in news coverage, as the ownership class’s interests are the same as media outlets, which have the profit motive as a large part of their reason for operation. As Martin describes it:

…there is a constant battle between corporate interests defining consumerism in one fashion – buy, buy, buy and let business do as it wishes – versus labor, which asks for a living wage to participate in a consumer economy and also fair, safe modes of production. The major news media are commercial, corporate media, and generally frame news stories in ways that favor corporate interests…. In other words, the mainstream news media will not cover labor news, and will not cover it in favorable frames, unless the story is thrust on them. (9)

A specific result of cost cutting within the news media is a decrease of manpower in terms of reporters. As it pertains to labor issues specifically, labor reporters have been systematically replaced with journalists that cover business. In other words, newspapers that have historically had separate labor and business sections in their newspapers have folded those sections into one all-encompassing business section, and as such, business journalists (who tend to favor the management/ownership side of business issues) are now asked to report on labor issues. Park and Wright found that from 1980-2000, there was a substantial increase in business reporting coupled with a decrease of labor reporting in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and the Associated Press. In addition to cost cutting, they defined four more reasons why business reporting increased while labor news decreased since 1980: an historical move to more libertarian free market economic policies, the corporate media’s increased desire for more advertising revenue, a heightened sensitivity to business objectives, and the practice of businesses funding journalism awards. (10).

This is the economic landscape in which the two Philadelphia newspapers I will present in my case study found themselves in 2009. Not only were substansial cost
cutting measures applied, but centralized ownership of these papers reinforced a homogenized negative stereotype in their coverage, illustrated by many examples of Parenti’s seven traits of organized labor, listed above.
Chapter 3: Case Study - Newspaper Coverage of the November 2009 SEPTA/TWU Strike In Philadelphia

The purpose of this case study is threefold. First is to reinforce, and add to the existing research, more evidence of pro-consumer, pro-business news media frames within the context of reporting unfavorably on organized labor issues. The second is to examine an aspect of the news media within that coverage that has previously not been heavily researched – the effect that centralized ownership and consolidation of news media can have on organized labor reporting. In this particular case, two major Philadelphia dailies, owned by the same company, were examined not only for clear examples of uses of the negative labor frames researchers such as Parenti have suggested, but also for similarity in content in covering a specific labor issue. Thirdly, within the discussion of labor unions and the news media, researchers have focused primarily on private sector unions in their research. I would like to show that public sector union news coverage falls under the same pro-business/pro-consumer frames as private sector union news coverage. Before the actual content analysis to illustrate these findings, however, I would first like to present a brief but necessary history of the recent financial details surrounding the purchase of the Philadelphia Inquirer and the Philadelphia Daily News by Brian Tierney and the Philadelphia Media Holdings Company, since such an example shows the absolute cut-throat practice of the profit motive of capital in regards to the media in action. Secondly, specific to this example, it shows how such centralized ownership can create a very real perception of conflict of interest and how that can damage the quality of journalism within the papers.
Recent Financial History of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Daily News*

While the study of effects (whether financial or contextual) on media ownership and subsequent consolidation is not new, there are certain elements that are relatively recent in occurrence. Perhaps the biggest emerging element of media ownership consolidation is the formation of private equity (PE) firms, and their buying of multiple media outlets – including broadcast, print (such as newspapers) and websites. While ownership consolidation is something political economists have been studying for a long time, the emergence of PE firms buying up media outlets has not yet been examined closely, mainly due to the newness of the practice, as PE firms did not come into widespread use until the 1980s (and even then were not primarily focused on media). As time has passed however, PE firms have become big time players within media ownership, due to such factors as deregulation and cross-ownership. Henwood describes private equity funding as “pools of capital raised from institutional investors like pension funds and very rich individuals, all gathered together to do deals.” (11) Bettig offers a concise description of the ways in which PE uses leveraged buyouts (a very labyrinth and complicated financial process) to work to the advantage of the investor(s):

The primary strategies of PE [private equity] managers involve serious cost cutting, including eliminating jobs and selling off unprofitable assets while squeezing out as much profit as they can from what is left. After turning “distressed” companies around, the PE firms sell them wholesale to other buyers yielding proceeds much higher than the initial buyout. In other cases, they sell the company back to the public – not in the socialist sense, but rather through the stock markets. As the cost cutting and sell-off occur, private equity managers pay themselves large fees, waiting for what Henwood calls “the magic” to kick in. (12)

This is precisely what happened when McClatchy sold two of its least profitable newspaper holdings – The *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the *Philadelphia Daily News* to
Brian Tierney and the Toll Brothers, who had formed the PE Company Philadelphia Media Holdings to obtain the papers in 2006. Philadelphia Media Holdings purchased The Inquirer and the Daily News, as well as the online presence of the papers, philly.com, for $562 million. (13) The deal was hailed as the Philadelphia newspaper market’s “return to local private ownership” despite the fact that Philadelphia Media Holdings was a conglomerate group of investors that were scattered throughout the country. The only “local tie-in” was Tierney, who was named Philadelphia Media Holdings’ CEO. At a press conference shortly after the purchase, Tierney was quick to sound triumphant and state that cost cutting would not mean trimming the labor force:

The next great era of Philadelphia journalism begins today with this announcement,” Tierney said. “We intend to be long-term owners committed to serving this region with the vigorous, high-quality journalism we all expect of The Philadelphia Inquirer, Daily News and philly.com, and we intend to preserve both papers and their unique and valuable contributions.” Tierney, speaking at a news conference at the newspapers’ building, said the new ownership group does not plan to cut jobs. “We didn’t buy it to cut it,” he said. “We want to grow these publications, not try to manage the decline.” (14)

Despite that proclamation, the reality soon became quite different. In the ensuing three years after the purchase, Philadelphia Media Holdings cut approximately four hundred jobs from the staff of both papers (16). Also, despite the long-term optimism in his statement in the wake of the buyout, Philadelphia Media Holdings filed for Chapter 11

3 Very much in the same way a real estate agent would “flip” a house, McClatchy sold twelve newspapers it acquired in buying Knight-Ridder before that deal was even complete because they did not meet McClatchy’s “acquisition criteria.” McClatchy received $2.1 billion in compensation for selling off those papers, which they had liquidated in order to reduce the debt incurred in buying Knight Ridder. (15) By selling papers such as the Philadelphia Inquirer and the Minneapolis Star Tribune (which it owned before the sale), McClatchy was liquidating assets and shifting debt around, also receiving a substantial tax break in the case of selling the Star Tribune. McClatchy in essence, was making money and reducing debt liability by buying newspapers in bulk, divesting them, and re-selling them to private equity firms.
bankruptcy in 2009. The problem seemed to be that despite the *Inquirer* and the *Daily News* still being operationally profitable, Philadelphia Media Holdings incurred so much debt to purchase the papers it (supposedly) could not pay its creditors. Philadelphia Media Holdings purposefully missed an interest payment on its debt in order to default (despite having the money available to make the payment), then filed for Chapter 11. (17)

The PE strategy seems clear here. Instead of selling off outright, Philadelphia Media Holdings attempted to shed debt liability of the papers by claiming a bankruptcy it could have avoided. Indeed, Philadelphia Media Holdings attempted to *buy back* the papers after the bankruptcy was filed, but ultimately lost because the bid was about $1 million short of what was needed. Ultimately, another private equity firm formed for the purpose of *yet another* buyout -- Philadelphia Media Network (mostly comprised of the banks and creditors holding the Philadelphia Media Holding’s outstanding debt) -- bought the papers for $139 million. (18)

This strategy shows how PE firms can “hedge” financial decisions for maximizing gain or minimizing loss. The two end results of this hedge would benefit the large financial interests that invested in the paper either way. On the one hand, if Philadelphia Media Holdings “bought back” the papers out of bankruptcy, they would have shed hundreds of millions in debt. Conversely, if their bid failed, Tierney and the other investors of Philadelphia Media Holdings could walk away from a large debt tab, without any substantial personal loss. All of this of course, involved newspapers that were operationally still turning profit. As Tierney stated during the bankruptcy “This restructuring is focused solely on our debt, not our operations. Our

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4 A *NY Times* article states that Philadelphia media holdings claimed a $36 million profit from their two papers in 2009. (19)
operations are sound and profitable.\textsuperscript{5} All in a day’s work for a multi-millionaire venture capitalist that can easily walk away from a media company he heaped such high praise upon once he bought it. Because of the trail of high level debt buying and selling, one must really wonder if PE firms like the one headed by Tierney really had the best interests of quality media and journalism in mind or purely just the financial trends of the market (and the moneymaking potential within these still profitable operations). We must ask: is so much concentrated operational control, labor reduction and debt-shifting a positive thing for media companies and the content they create? Not only does a reduction in staff reduce the quality and quantity of sound journalism, but the real world concern of job loss due to newspapers being “bought out” can result in a chilling effect of what is editorially covered in a newsroom. This could easily be attributed to wanting to look cooperative to an ownership that may have cost cutting and staff reduction in mind. In addition to these financial concerns, PE firms can also bring potential conflicts of interest, as stock owners/board members may select CEOs that come from non-media backgrounds. Such is the case with Tierney, who owned a public relations firm prior to investing in Philadelphia Media Holdings.

\textsuperscript{5} One other problem with PE firm ownership is the lack of transparency regarding finances. PE firms do not have to file the same amount of disclosure data that publicly traded companies do.
**Brian Tierney and Conflict of Interest**

Another serious issue with how giant PE firms can have a negative effect on media is by bringing potential conflicts of interests to media outlets when ownership changes. The trend of “buy, liquidate, cut and sell” that PE firms engage in means that PE firms need to constantly be buying up many new and different companies and buying and selling off many different types of companies. Because of the nature of this practice, PE firms become more concerned with bottom lines and economic business models rather than quality journalism. This may lead to insensitivity towards fundamental non-economic issues directly related to the business and industries the PE firms are consolidating. This problem can be illustrated with the example of Brian Tierney and his work prior to coming to own and be the CEO of Philadelphia’s two major newspapers.

Prior to forming Philadelphia Media Holding Company, Brian Tierney owned and operated one of the largest public relations firms in Philadelphia - Tierney and Partners. Tierney’s client list ranged from IBM, McDonald’s, Wawa, Verizon, the PA Lottery and the Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corporation. (21) The role of a public relations firm, quite simply, is to create a positive presence and public media image for their clients. This is, of course, in stark contrast to the idea of ethical journalism, which is tasked with providing the public with information – some of which may be necessarily unflattering at times. As it turns, out by the time Tierney had formed Philadelphia Media Holdings, he had already cemented a reputation with many reporters on the *Inquirer’s* staff – mainly because he would call the news desks and challenge negative stories that may have run regarding clients at his public relations firm:
Tierney acted as an advocate for many of his clients in all things media-related. When reporters called his customers, he called the reporters—and their editors. And everyone soon learned that the little dude who was clownish enough to slap salami on a looong Wawa hoagie as a publicity stunt—well, that guy had another side. He could turn whirling dervish—a blur of flying knees, elbows and teeth. He called Inky scribe Peter Dobrin on his coverage of the Philadelphia Orchestra and columnist Monica Yant Kinney on behalf of a powerful banking executive. He rang Ralph Cipriano as the investigative reporter pursued the Catholic Church—a dustup that sparked national interest. He called more reporters and editors and accused them of bias and unethical behavior than anyone can remember. And sometimes he did his hockey enforcer routine when he wasn't even getting paid. The wars left scars so deep that the most disconcerting thing about his taking control of the Inquirer and Daily News may not even be Tierney’s noted conservative tilt, which is considerable: He helped Bush the Son attract Catholic voters, served as chairman for Republican Sam Katz’s failed 2003 bid for mayor, and for many years spun conservative on the Sunday Channel 6 chat show Inside Story. Even his hair—perhaps the most unique 'do this side of Donald Trump—veritably cascades, riverlike, to the right. But what really has some people quaking is Tierney's unique diet, which for a time included journalists. For breakfast, lunch and dinner. (22)

The most notorious incident of Tierney’s attempts at influencing Inquirer news coverage came in the late 1990s, when Robert Cipriano, then a reporter for the Inquirer, wrote an article critical of Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua and the Philadelphia Archdiocese. The thrust of the article was that despite the Archdiocese closing down schools in many lower income areas in the city, Cardinal Bevilacqua was spending several hundred thousand dollars of the church’s money in renovating his thirty-room mansion and about $500,000 more on his personal summer vacation home in Ventnor, New Jersey. Obviously, this story did not set well with Cardinal Bevilacqua, and before the story was printed he set out to kill it. The Philadelphia Archdiocese was a client of Tierney’s public relations firm, and Cardinal Bevilacqua was a close personal friend of Tierney’s. Tierney was able to have several meetings with Inquirer editors, and was subsequently able to get the story edited to remove the more unflattering parts about the Cardinal. The incident was covered
in a 2001 issue of *Editor and Publisher*. This excerpt describes Tierney’s involvement and influence over the matter:

Archdiocese officials had refused to reply to Cipriano's questions, and Tierney told the editors to come see him if they wanted some answers. Tierney demanded the right to select which reporters would cover the archdiocese, one editor recalls, and warned that Bevilacqua, spiritual leader of 1.45 million Roman Catholics, was prepared to launch a public campaign against the circulation-challenged Inquirer. … In an interview last week with E&P, Bevilacqua praised Tierney as "a great help to us" and, recalling the three meetings with the Inquirer in 1996 and 1997, declared flatly: "He stopped the story. That was the important thing." The cardinal added that ever since Tierney dealt with the editors, "The Inquirer has been very positive in their stories, much more than they have ever been." Brian Tierney told E&P, "I don't think religions and other nonprofits should necessarily be covered the way the federal government is covered." (23)

Subsequently, Cipriano was also fired from the *Inquirer* because of fallout from the piece in addition to Tierney’s protestations. Subsequently, Cipriano took the full story he originally wrote to the *National Catholic Reporter*, which did publish the original story in full. Cipriano also sued the *Inquirer* for libel, stating his story was factual and that claims he had a personal vendetta against the Cardinal were false. At the urging of the Archdiocese, not wishing to be involved in a libel trial, the *Inquirer* settled out of court with Cipriano. (24)

The above story is a clear example of Mr. Tierney’s stripe as a good PR man and agenda setter – precisely the kind of person that would be at direct odds with not trying to influence his new acquisition’s content if they printed stories he did not like. Indeed, the *Inquirer* staff was so concerned about the potential influence he could have over the

6 It can also be noted that in a February 2001 issue of *Philadelphia Magazine*, Tierney and his PR firm were profiled in their role in “getting out” the Catholic vote for George W. Bush. Tierney got the Cardinal to speak onstage on Bush’s behalf, and bragged, “The pope had named him a Knight of St. Gregory and implied that Bush's policies, including his tax cut, matched those of the church.” (25)
paper they asked Tierney to sign a “pledge” to not influence the content or editorial decisions of the paper. Cipriano, for one, was not convinced that would do any good. “I was standing there, listening to everyone applaud [watching Tierney sign the pledge] and I was thinking ‘I probably worked with this guy more than anyone else. He doesn’t understand what reporters do, and more important he doesn’t think it [neutral reporting] should be done.’” (26)

These aforementioned traits – PE firms buying media companies to consolidate and downsize for profit and non-journalism professionals investing in media and creating conflict of interest potentials if they assume ownership roles can primarily be attributed to the commoditization of news as a consumer product. Consolidated capital wishes to minimize costs and increase profits, while labor unions exist to increase wages and benefits for their members. Since giant media companies (and the PE firms that control them) live within this sphere – there can be a trickle down “chilling effect” that can be very problematic in the modern corporate newsroom. In the Philadelphia example, for instance, if someone like Brian Tierney is willing to manipulate news for PR reasons, it is not unreasonable to expect that the newsrooms under his control may feel the unintended consequences of reporting on labor in a negative way if cost cutting and the thought of the loss of union jobs at the paper is a real possibility. While there is no public record of Tierney making specific anti-union statements, his aforementioned hard conservative line and his aggressive cost cutting and job elimination measures certainly could have had an effect on the two papers’ labor reporting, given his extreme attitude towards micro-management and spin. Since Tierney did not step down as CEO from the papers until May of 2010, his oversight and personal influence was present at the papers during the
time of the SEPTA strike. A story in the *Philadelphia Business Journal* said the job cuts at the papers had “employees on edge,” as these positions are union positions represented by the Newspaper Guild. Newspaper Guild President Henry Holcomb stated, “It’s time to change the climate of fear to a climate of working together, so we can solve this [cost cutting/layoffs].” (27)

So, just how might such overbearing factors translate into coverage on the page (or the computer screen)? I will now examine some news articles from the *Inquirer* and the *Daily News* regarding the 2009 SEPTA (South Eastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority)/TWU (Transit Workers Union) Local 234 strike. The analysis will not only show some of the negative traits as suggested by Parenti and others, but also the homogeny in coverage.

**Content Analysis of the Two Philadelphia Dailies**

The 2009 TWU strike in Philadelphia was a six-day strike that lasted from the early morning hours of November first to the sixth. There were a myriad of issues surrounding the strike – everything from the employee’s wages, healthcare, pension funding, “picking” rights (the ability for senior employees to have choice over what shifts they could work and what routes) and outsourcing/contracting issues which threatened job security within SEPTA. Another frustration that added to employee dissention was that they had been working without a contract for ten months, as their previous one had expired in March. Unfortunately, the more complex details of these issues, and a fair assessment and discussion of them, did not occur in Philadelphia’s news media. These

7 The terms “SEPTA strike” and “TWU strike” are used interchangeably by the papers, but reference the same event.
specific contractual issues were mentioned only sparingly, with no full exploration of them, and what they would mean for the workers. Once the strike occurred however, both papers treated the strike action as sudden, irrational and unexpected (despite the very real possibility of it happening since the contract had expired in March), and as an unfair, overbearing burden put to the riders of mass transit.

Indeed, instead of thoroughly discussing the collective bargaining process throughout its duration for SEPTA contract negotiations (March to November), and the important cause and effect such bargaining would have on the lives of SEPTA workers, there were three overarching themes in the two papers’ coverage of the strike. The first was the imbalance of coverage/emphasis on the strike action itself. The second was the over coverage of the effect on the consumer and how the strike affected riders. The third is the decidedly negative slant the two papers had against organized labor in the in the op-ed pages and letters to the editor printed during the strike period. With these three traits, the tone in discussing the disruption clearly sides against the union, and focuses so much attention on the public’s being inconvenienced and "incensed,” a thorough discussion of why the union struck, or the true contractual issues are never discussed in any detail. I will now look at each of these three traits more closely.

**I. Emphasis on Strike Actions**

As Parenti has suggested, a significant factor in how the media negatively portrays organized labor news revolves around strike coverage. The two most prominent ways this happens are that media frames the strike actions as a senseless and avoidable, and also emphasizes the union’s unwillingness to negotiate while not applying that same
assumption to the management side. Second, the news media focuses much more heavily on the *impact* rather than the *cause* of the strike. One way to clearly view this subtle bias in action is to examine the amount of coverage a strike action gets in contrast to how much coverage contract negotiations prior to the strike receive.

As stated previously, the contract that the TWU was under that eventually led to the strike action in question expired in mid March 2009. There is a substantial difference in the amount of coverage attributed the TWU and their contract with SEPTA from March 2009 to just before the strike in November of the same year. Using the search terms “TWU Local 234,” “SEPTA strike” and “Transit Workers Union” in Lexis Nexis, during the eight-month pre-strike period, only six news items regarding the issue ran in the *Daily News*, while twenty-seven ran during the month of the strike in November. Along with this disparity, the general tone around the TWU in the *Daily News*’ pages was more congenial than during the strike period. In this scant pre-strike coverage, union and management officials were generally portrayed as mutually working together to reach a new contract without a strike. The coverage, however, provided very little in the way of informative details to why the contract negotiations reached an impasse – a very important element for the public to know. Rather, the news articles in question predominantly quoted union leaders and management leaders in generalities, and usually stated sides were “far apart” on contract details. Two articles, placed four days apart in the *Daily News*, illustrate perfectly the lack of detailed information and clearly emphasize how a strike action would be bad (even if necessary in the future). The first, entitled “Though Sides Far Apart, No SEPTA Strike Coming” from March 12, read in its entirety:

*Willie Brown, president of Transport Workers Union Local 234, told SEPTA officials yesterday that there would be no strike at 12:01 a.m. Sunday, when the*
union's contract expires. That's great news for riders who make 916,000 weekday trips on SEPTA's city buses and trains. Brown told the *Daily News* that although the two sides are "far apart" on big issues such as pensions, a strike would "not be fair to the riding public," so he is willing to keep negotiating until the two sides agree on a new contract. "If this goes on a couple more weeks, I don't really care, as long as we get there," said Brown, who put no time limit on his no-strike promise. Local 234 represents 4,700 operators and mechanics in SEPTA's City Transit Division, so a strike would shut down all buses and subway/elevated trains in the city. SEPTA spokesman Richard Maloney said that Brown's promise is welcome news for "so many businesses and schools that would have had to make expensive alternative transportation plans to get riders to work and to school." (29)

Four days later, “Contract Expires, But SEPTA Keeps Rolling” was printed to update the progress. It read in full:

SEPTA's buses, subways, trolleys and trains keep rolling, even though the union contract for 4,700 city operators and mechanics expired at 12:01 a.m. yesterday. Willie Brown, president of Transport Workers Union Local 234, doesn't want to make it any rougher for the riding public - especially for students, businesses and those looking for work. His no-strike policy will continue "as long as we get there," said Brown. Both sides last negotiated for a contract in the City Transit Division on Saturday. The next round of talks is scheduled for tomorrow at the Sheraton Philadelphia Center City Hotel, 17th and Race streets. Both sides remain far apart on wages, benefits and subcontracting. (30)

As previously stated, these two news pieces are two of only six items that ran in the *Daily News* during the time period of the contract expiration/pre-strike. Of the other four, one was a rider contingency plan published by SEPTA in case of a strike. Another was a similar “quote sides with no relevant contract details” piece, and the other two were letters to the editor. One of those letters was a simple thank you for no strike, while the other was an op-ed written by TWU President Willie Brown. It discusses some of the issues as to why the contract talks were stalling:

With the expiration of our union contract, it's time for SEPTA to deal with reality and stop posturing. Our union understands that the last thing the riding public needs is for us to eventually be forced to strike. That's why all we are asking in these negotiations is for a fair contract that gives our Local 234 members respect and dignity along with fair wages and benefits. But SEPTA management is making it very tough by sticking with an approach that ignores present circumstances. For
example, look at the way SEPTA plans to use the $200 million they got from the Obama stimulus. SEPTA has refused to discuss our proposal to spend this money to hire Philadelphia residents as permanent SEPTA employees. This would strengthen SEPTA for the future by hiring and training new employees to replace Local 234 members who retire. Instead, SEPTA has proclaimed that "in the spirit of President Obama," they will supposedly create more than 3,000 jobs by giving contracts to outside companies, even though local 234 members could perform much of the work in-house quicker and cheaper. Obama wants to "create and retain" jobs, not corporate patronage. SEPTA plans to use the stimulus money to hire outside contractors for short-term projects. Philadelphia-area residents, the people from the neighborhoods who ride SEPTA every day, have no guarantee that they will get a job with any of the out-of-state contractors who win the bids. We believe that it is in SEPTA's long-term interest to use the stimulus funds to create opportunities for local residents to have a career working for SEPTA, not just a temporary job. As our union bargains in good faith for a fair contract, TWU Local 234 will also continue bargaining for the riders of SEPTA and residents of Philadelphia and surrounding counties because we are looking to the future. (31)

Note that the biggest emphasis in the op-ed is placed on job outsourcing, not wages or benefits. Brown was also quoted in one of the other six pieces mentioned about this very same issue:

**TWU Local 234 President Willie Brown told the Daily News** that a big issue at the bargaining table is SEPTA's policy of subcontracting out its track and station rehabilitation work, including several massive projects due to start soon, funded by the transit agency's $200 million share of President Obama's economic-stimulus plan. We could do a lot of that stimulus-money work but SEPTA is not using us," Brown said, referring to union members. We can't rebuild the Market Frankford El or build a bridge, but we can do track work and we can fix a station up. We have a whole track department. We have carpenters and all kinds of skilled workers. But SEPTA's decided they're not going to spend one dime of the stimulus money paying us to do the things we know how to do. They're going to subcontract everything out. That's a top issue in these negotiations and it won't come off the table. (32)

Unfortunately, the paper never subsequently ran any pieces exploring this, or any other related issues detailing why their was an impasse on the contract negotiations. Instead, the emphasis was placed on the avoiding the strike action in generalities (the six pieces that ran in March), and then a virtual blackout where no pieces of information at all were run from late March to late October, just before the strike started in early November. By
choosing to not explore any contract items in substantial detail during the initial contract expiration period, and subsequently dropping all coverage for seven months until the strike occurred, the *Daily News* was, in effect, guilty of exactly the type of negative bias toward labor Parenti suggests. For one, the vast disparity in volume of coverage (virtually none during the contract expiration versus a large increase in stories during the strike period) has the effect of placing a negative emphasis on the strike action, making it seem as though it could have been avoided and was actually a selfish union action. Secondly, this imbalance of coverage directly placed the emphasis on the effect of the strike rather than the causation – a seven-month impasse where no strike occurred - which also creates a negative impression to the reading public. If there were a few stories in the paper from April to September updating the contract negotiations and some relevant details, for example, readers may have been reminded that the union was bargaining for a new contract and working for an extended period of time without one. Such information may have had the effect of letting readers know that while a strike may be inconvenient, it also may have been a necessary occurrence, reasonably done in the union’s best interest. By not presenting what may be in the union’s best interest (in this case a strike as a last resort impasse resolution), the media presents the union’s actions in a one-sided, negative way.

The same style and patterns of coverage can be seen in the *Inquirer*. Using the same search parameters and time frame applied to the *Daily News*, only four news items were run in the *Inquirer* relating to the contact impasse from mid-March to the end of October, while forty-one items ran during the strike month of November. Of the four pre-strike articles, one was an article about contingency plans for SEPTA riders in case of a strike. The other three pieces, as was the case with the *Daily News*, also emphasized quotes from
both sides and the importance of strike avoidance, and that sides were “far apart” and that talks were “ongoing”. From an article entitled “SEPTA, Transport Union In Talks To Avert Strike” that ran on March 6:

SEPTA management and officials of its largest union will return to the bargaining table today to try to avert a strike by bus, subway, and trolley operators. The contract with Transport Worker’s Union Local 234 expires March 15. Two months of sporadic talks have made little progress. "We are as far apart as we were before the start of the process," TWU president Willie Brown said yesterday. "Our demands have been ignored."... Brown said the TWU was seeking changes in subcontracting and training provisions of the contract to allow TWU members to do more warranty and other repair work now done by outside workers. "Those things are more important to us than wages," he said. "We have to get job security for our members." And he said the union wanted neutral arbitrators to rule on grievances. Brown said TW workers were unable to get fair treatment from SEPTA supervisors. "They don't treat us with respect. . . . It's always 'my way or the highway' with them." (33)

“SEPTA City Union to Work Past Contract,” an article that ran six days later, presented a similar frame:

“We understand that the riding public depends on our members getting them to and from work... that is why we are determined to keep negotiating until we reach an agreement,” Local 234 president Willie Brown said in a statement yesterday. Brown said the union had not taken a strike-authorization vote. “We won’t take a strike vote unless we feel it is necessary, and as long as we feel we are making progress in negotiations, the riding public has nothing to worry about from our union.”... The two sides said they remained far apart on wages, benefits and subcontracting issues. (34)

Another of the Inquirer’s four pre-strike pieces was an editorial that once again emphasized the strike aspect of the situation, and the negative connotations placed on such an action. Entitled “SEPTA Talks: In No Mood to Strike,” it read:

The contract covering 4,700 bus, train and trolley operators expires Saturday night, and the talks entered the final week with both sides said to be far apart on key issues. But the lack of a strike vote through yesterday was a good sign, along with conciliatory remarks by TWU Local 234 president Willie Brown and SEPTA general manager Joseph M. Casey. Reaching a deal by the weekend or talking past the deadline would be good news for the region's hundreds of thousands of daily transit riders. A shutdown of city service would result in crowding, delays and
disruption for all riders, as thousands of commuters shift to the regional trains, whose workers are under a separate contract. (35)

As with the Daily News, certain claims made by the union were not followed up in subsequent coverage in the Inquirer, all the way up to and including the actual strike. In addition to the same outsourcing issues being neglected in subsequent coverage, the union also was seeking to add neutral arbitrators to the grievance procedure to not only speed up the grievance process, but give employees more equitable treatment from their employers. However, none of these non-wage issues were given any further discussion.

There is only one notable difference in the pre-strike coverage of the two papers that must be noted. That is the inclusion of actual proposal numbers and wages in the stories in the Inquirer. While these inclusions should be applauded for providing a bit more detailed information to the reader, it must also be noted the more favorable parts of these numbers in regard to the union were only mentioned twice during the scant contract expiration coverage in March, while management’s numbers, which made the union’s proposals seem “out of touch,” were emphasized more. Also, these wages and benefits numbers were reprinted multiple times in Inquirer stories during the strike period in November. Yet, no mention of SEPTA management salaries or benefit compensation was concurrently placed with them. Because of this, the reader has no reference with which to know how reasonable the union’s wage increase proposals actually were in regard to the organization as a whole. Secondly, during the strike period, the TWU asked for having binding arbitration solve the impasse. Binding arbitration is a process in which a neutral, third party acts as a judge between the union and management. The arbitrator hears both sides of the issue causing impasse in a confined period of time, and rules on a resolution. Both parties are then legally obligated to abide by the arbitrator’s ruling. Binding
arbitration is an alternative to striking, and if it had been employed in this situation, it would have ended the strike almost immediately. Concurrently, if binding arbitration had been sought prior to the strike, the strike would have been averted altogether. Despite the union’s willingness to try this solution, SEPTA management/government officials refused that option. By refusing to do that, SEPTA management was prolonging the strike – yet only one article appeared documenting this part of the story.

In general, in terms of homogenous coverage, aside from a few minor differences, the *Daily News* and the *Inquirer* both placed a large emphasis on the effect of the strike rather than then the cause, and had noticeably congruent differences in their amounts of coverage. As a result, not only did both papers present these issues within the negative frames Parenti suggests, but also offer the reader no true variety or differentiation in coverage regarding the issue.

**II. Emphasis On Consumers**

Martin and Puette have also suggested that the heavy volume of media coverage during a strike action places emphasis on the effects of a strike more so than the cause. This heavy emphasis on consumers keeps the news coverage in a predominantly pro-business/management frame. Martin cites the 1994 Major League Baseball strike as an example, noting that the dominant narrative in the mainstream media was that of the “jilted” baseball fan, and how the “millionaires vs. billionaires” strike was ruining the game for them. Within this narrative, Martin argues, the reasons for the strike are lost, and the needs/wants of the consumers are placed above the unionized workforce that is striking. Consequently, information on what effect giving up on the strike by the workers
would have is lost, and this has the effect of turning the public against a strike action, because the public sees it as an affront to their interests (in this case entertainment from watching a baseball game). (36)

While there is a notable difference in the effect on the public between a private sector strike and a public sector one (not being able to watch a baseball game vs. having a ride to work on public transit, for example), the effect of emphasizing the consumer over the union’s interest in striking has the same negative effect on perception and negativity. Such is the case of the 2009 SEPTA strike. Once again using the search terms “TWU Local 234,” “SEPTA strike” and “Transit Workers Union” in Lexis Nexis, thirty-three news items appear regarding the 2009 SEPTA strike in the Philadelphia Daily News. Of those, twenty-two contain at least one reporter comment or quote of frustrated commuters dealing with the strike, even in articles where such a statement would be irrelevant. For example, in the article “Pension $ Seen as Ticket to End SEPTA Picket,” the lead sentence of the article states “Negotiations between SEPTA and Transport Workers Union Local 234 could resume as early as today, possibly ending a strike that left hundreds of thousands of commuters without transportation to work or school.” (37) The rest of the article goes on to discuss details of resolving pension funding issues around the strike. Yet the lead in to the article stresses the impact on the consumer, without there being any relevance to the article at hand. Another example of this is in a piece called “SEPTA, TWU are Talking, But Not With Each Other.” Despite the article being solely focused on detailed multiple scenarios of wage agreements for the contract, this sentence appears in the first paragraph: “To the thousands of workers and students in Philadelphia
growing increasingly weary of struggling with trains, taxis, bikes, vans and cars to get where they need to go, a deal couldn’t come soon enough.” (38)

While such subtle “consumer is king” references may or may not have a large influence on public opinion, full articles dedicated solely to consumer inconvenience can. As stated above, six articles whose sole purpose was to interview and discuss commuter inconvenience appeared in the *Daily News*. Even their titles give it away – “The Commuter Blues,” “Cranky Commuters Deal As Best They Can” and “By Bike, On, Foot, They Got There”. In each piece, the commuter (a.k.a. consumer) is portrayed as being inconvenienced, yet perseverant and defiant in the struggle to get where they are going despite the strike. An example of consumer emphasis from “Cranky Commuters Deal as Best They Can”:

Even bicyclists were hemmed in by gridlock on the first day of the city's SEPTA strike. Commuters gritted their teeth and chose any means available to make due without public transit then the unexpected strike broke in the predawn hours yesterday. Besides bicycling, driving into the city or carpooling, many commuters crammed onto Regional Rail lines, whose workers operate under a separate contract than the city division and were not part of the strike. Nightmarish gridlock occurred on Center City streets during both rush hours, and one bike rider reported that cyclists were forced to ride on the sidewalk, and that some almost fell off their bikes trying to cut between the packed vehicles. (39)

The six articles that focus on consumer impact go beyond generalizations though. One piece entitled “Tens of Thousands of Students Affected by SEPTA Strike,” focused solely on students trying to get to class:

More than 78,000 Philadelphia students who use SEPTA to get to and from school were asleep when transit workers walked off the job in the wee hours of the morning yesterday. Members of the Transport Workers Union Local 234 stopped operating subway, trolley and bus lines in the city at 3 a.m., bollixing up the students' morning routine. Later yesterday, district officials detailed how they would respond to the transit crisis. "We're anticipating a number of students that will not be able to make it to schools because they won't have access to public transportation," said district spokesman Fernando Gallard. (40)
Another piece, the aforementioned “Commuter Blues,” focuses on not just riders of public transit and their woes from the strike, but also how local businesses located at public transit stops were affected. The article states the strike was hurting these businesses because people waiting in lines for trains where the operators weren’t on strike didn’t want to get out of long lines to buy a concession:

You'd think the lines of harried commuters snaking through Suburban and Market East stations would mean a banner week for the businesses on the underground concourses. Think again. "Yes, there are more people this week, but business is really bad," said a manager of Kim's newsstand at Market East Station. "People don't want to leave their spots in long lines" for a paper, soda or a bite to eat. Workers said that strikes are always bad for business even with the increased foot traffic but that this year's walkout has been worse than the SEPTA strikes of 2005 and 1998 because the economy was already dragging things down. "We don't have the figures," said a jewelry vendor at the Gallery mall, which is attached to Market East. "It doesn't matter if you're making money or not; you still have to come to work." Across the hall, shoe, watch and other food vendors looked on as hundreds of people stood before them, some waiting in lines 150-people long. "I feel bad for everyone here," said Bill Schwarz, a Philly resident who made the unlikely decision to come to Suburban Station to wind down after work. "I live in South Philly so I can walk to and from home. But the strike seems to be holding people as hostages in lines." (41)

Perhaps the biggest stretch, however, was a piece entitled “For Eagles Fans, the Missing Link… But Not Even $30 parking Will Keep Them From Birds/Cowboys.” This piece makes the claim that the strike is inconvenienced Philadelphia Eagles fans because rather than be able to ride public transit to an Eagles/Dallas Cowboys football game, the fans had to drive and pay $30 to park to be able to go:

SEPTA may have been on strike, but that didn't stop legions of fans from getting to the Eagles' 100th matchup with the Cowboys yesterday. It did make it a little more challenging for some of them, though. By 8 p.m., 20 minutes before game time, police and parking attendants already were turning away drivers trying to squeeze into one of the lots. Fans walked, caught cabs, carpooled and even biked to get to the game. "We would have taken SEPTA instead of having to take another car," said Charlie Hamilton, 25, who was tailgating with eight others before the game started. It took longer and cost more for Chelsea Griffis, 21, a student at Thomas Jefferson
University, to get to the game. If the SEPTA union workers weren't on strike, “we would drink and then take SEPTA,” Griffis said. Instead, they had to wait until they got to the game before drinking. The price of the whole adventure was higher too. (42)

While it certainly can be said that public transit not being available for people to get to work is somewhat newsworthy and should be reported on to some extent, making the argument that someone cannot get drunk to go to a football game because of a public transit strike part of that newsworthiness can certainly be questioned.

It must also be noted that focusing so heavily on only one side of the issue certainly creates an imbalance in public perception. While it certainly is in the public’s interest to know of the strike and how they can get where they need to be if they rely on public transit, the consistently one-sided focus on negative commuter reaction can only have a negative impact on the union’s side of the strike issue. In these six consumer focused pieces, each one has quotes from commuters. Every quote is a negative one; there is not a single positive or supportive quote in favor of the union or the strike. Concurrently, there are also no quotes from any picketing union member – something that surely should have been included in these pieces in order to attain a more balanced approach to discussing the issue within the articles. Such an inclusion would also give readers some reasoning for the strike from the worker’s perspective, as well as some context.

The Philadelphia Inquirer shows a similar pattern in consumer emphasis. Using the same Lexis-Nexis search terms, there were forty-five articles in the Inquirer pertaining to the SEPTA strike during the strike period. Of those forty-five, twenty-nine made

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8 Such an appropriate piece would be publishing alternate routes and letting people know what public transit would be effected. in the papers, as was the case with “SEPTA Prepares Riders For the Strike.” In the piece, SEPTA gave commuters contingency plans for finding regional rail trains tat were not affected by the strike.
commentary regarding consumer effects, using the phrasing such as “crippling the city” or “wreaking havoc” on transportation. Another common thread was the impending World Series games in Philadelphia at that time – numerous references were made to the city getting a “black eye” on the national stage if a transit strike happened during the prestigious baseball championship. The Inquirer also ran a substantial amount of “effect on consumer only” pieces. Of the twenty-nine that have some mention on consumer/commuter impact, ten of them focus solely on the “disgruntled” commuters and no other relevant strike information. The titles are similar to those found in the Daily News: “Commuters Gritting It and Bearing It,” “Amid Walkout, Extra Workout: Fit Commuters Take To the Bike,” “For Commuters, A Day That Went From Bad To Worse,” “They Did Get From Here to There – Slowly.” Excerpts from these articles clearly show a negative view of the strike based on consumer emphasis in the form of negative quotations, and reporter editorializing. Three direct commuter situations/quotations from “Commuters Gritting It and Bearing It” illustrate this:

As the SEPTA strike gummed up the city works for a third infuriating day, Philadelphia commuters persevered yesterday, proving their resilience, their patience, and (let's be honest) their resignation that there's nothing they could do but accept and deal. Stepping off an R7 Chestnut Hill East train at the end of the line at the end of his day, but not quite at the end of his rope, Jim Bondelid said that with each day, the inconvenience was becoming more tractable. … Although he has not been inconvenienced nearly as much as commuters who rely on buses and trolleys, he said, he didn't feel much sympathy for the union. "The union is a monopoly," he said. "And people hate monopolies. One hundred years ago, corporations were the wolves. Now, unions are the wolves." … Despite several days' practice and the relative sanity of line formation last night, the trip home turned into a colossal headache for Ruth Wait. Wait, who works for a money-management firm in Center City, headed for Track 2, as directed by the helpful electronic signs in Suburban Station. Following the "long, long, long, long line," Wait said, she was herded onto the platform and thought she was boarding the R2. Twenty minutes later, she heard the conductor announce Washington Lane, and groaned. … She realized she was on the wrong train. "I don't know when I'll get home," she said, standing on an unfamiliar platform in Chestnut Hill, waiting for a train to take her
on the half-hour trip back into the city, where she would have to transfer to the right train to get her out to Abington. "Oh well," she said, feeling more sheepish than angry. Only appropriate for someone who had just been herded into the wrong pasture. ... Since the strike started, Dashika Wellington, 33, has traded her briefcase and heels for a backpack and sneakers, hiking the urban trail from her Brewerytown home to her Center City office. But last night, it rained. Wellington stood outside Two Penn Center Plaza bundled in a hooded coat and scarf, waiting for a friend to make the 40-minute drive in from Fox Chase to give her a ride home. Watching traffic crawl past City Hall, Wellington said, "It's definitely hard to be sympathetic to the union." Two people she knows were recently laid off from her law firm. "People are suffering, and everybody has to grin and bear it. So does the union." (43)

From “For Commuters, A Day That Went From Bad To Worse,” more negative quotations and anecdotes surrounding the strike’s impact:

The impact of SEPTA’s predawn strike started out bad and only got worse. Early-morning travelers, many trying to get to jobs in the suburbs, were stranded at bus and subway stations, left to work their cell phones for rides from friends or relatives. Taking to the roads, morning commuters clogged Center City intersections and caused backups of up to an hour over the bridges from New Jersey. But that was just a warm-up to the evening rush hour, which brought a crush of commuters to Regional Rail stations, left streets paralyzed with gridlock, and sent tempers rising. And brace yourself: Day Two is expected to be even worse. ... Mayor Nutter said the city was "ambushed" by the strike. "You can't put a dollar value on the disruption and aggravation," he said. "This is unfair to the citizens of the city." (44)

From the piece “They Did Get From Here to There – Slowly”:

The alarm woke Larry Mattis at 3:15 a.m. yesterday, an hour and a half earlier than normal. On Day 2 of the transit workers’ strike, Mattis knew he would need plenty of extra time to get from his Collingswood home to his job at the King of Prussia mall. On an ordinary day, Mattis has a tough commute. It takes him more than an hour, sometimes 90 minutes, to get to King of Prussia via PATCO train and SEPTA’s Route 125 bus. As any driver knows, the Schuylkill Expressway is inaptly named. But yesterday was no ordinary day. Rather than his usual two-step commute, Mattis had to find a new way to work. With just one extra leg and a whole lot of waiting, he spent more than three hours en route - lots of time to share gripes with his fellow travelers and a reporter and photographer who tagged along for the ride ... . The extra day also gave him time to reflect on the transit workers who had upended his routine. Like other budget-conscious riders who rely on SEPTA, Mattis already seemed to find his patience wearing thin. "I'm very upset at SEPTA’s workers," he said as the day's first R5 left Suburban Station at 5:44 a.m., a minute behind schedule. "Based on the offer in the news, they've got it good - a signing
bonus and everything, I think they should take it." … Chuck Delross, 25, decided to hoof about a mile across Villanova University's campus to a stop on SEPTA's Norristown High Speed Line, a trolley Delross ordinarily takes to get to his job in Gulph Mills. … The connection seemed like a complex, Tinker-to-Evers-to-Chance routine that relied on perfect timing, Delross thought. Now, he was worried about being late, even though he had awakened at 4:30 a.m., two hours earlier than usual. "It's a trip that isn't all that easy to begin with, that's being made a lot less easy. I'm not happy," he said. Before going, Delross voiced his frustration with the Transport Workers Union's decision to strike during a historic economic downturn: "I'd like to think that I'm generally pro-union, but I think that this is a bad time for a strike." (45)

Once again, observe that all of these consumer “man-on-the street” quote pieces do not have one pro-union comment or any quotes or discussions with picketing workers. Instead the pieces focus solely on commuter frustration, detailing their commute routines and quoting their negative union sentiment and anger at the strike because of how it has affected them. Even in one quotation, a rider claims to “think he is pro-union,” but then derides the strike action.

Finally, as with the Daily News, a piece dedicated directly to the effect of the strike on students, entitled “Schools Brace For Strike Fallout” was run:

About 58,000 city students, including those from charter, parochial and private schools, use SEPTA, he said. Of the total, 35,150 are district students, 11,714 charter, and 11,695 parochial or private. Many city charter schools, which were open yesterday, saw attendance plummet, giving a glimpse of what district schools may face today. "It's a major hit. Our students come from 55 different zip codes, and the majority of them rely on SEPTA," said Peter Kountz, head of the Charter School for Architecture and Design, 105 S. Seventh St. (46)

It is also important to note in this article that the school systems in question were able in most cases to provide emergency bus services for their students. Despite the thrust of the article being students are not going to school because of transportation, the article also shows how the schools were able to provide some form of alternate accommodations, so
the strike clearly did not have as big an impact on student ridership as the article made it out to be.

   As these examples demonstrate, in terms of emphasis on the commuter/consumer, not only does the *Inquirer* exhibit the traits outlined by Purette and Martin, but it also provides no distinguishable coverage from the *Daily News* in regards to consumer emphasis. Such coverage, while in some regards important, nevertheless creates a one sided-imbalance of perception that focuses on effects rather causation, which has the real effect of presenting the union’s side of the strike in a one-sided negative light – a side that is not fairly represented.

**III. Opinion Pages Regarding the 2009 SEPTA Strike**

   Finally, the letters to the editor and opinion columns of the two papers also merit scrutiny, not only to gage anti-labor sentiment and hegemony in coverage, but also because it is in many ways a reflection of what readers are taking from the information presented in the papers. Searching the editorial content of the two papers during the pre-strike and strike period reaffirm many of the aforementioned negative traits of labor coverage and also reinforce the idea of very little diversity of opinion in the coverage of the jointly owned papers. The same Lexis-Nexis search used for the entirety of the case study produces a total of seventeen letters to the editor directly related to the topic in the *Daily News*. Of these, only one appeared in March during the beginning of the contract expiration and re-negotiation – the letter TWU President Willie Brown wrote expressing concerns about outsourcing that was discussed in a previous section. It is worth noting again this period of time is a crucial one with which to engage the public with
information pertaining to the issues on the table for a new contract. After all, if the argument can be made that the union’s actions toward SEPTA decidedly affect the public’s ability to get places, and it is taxpayer’s money being spent, then why only focus on the issue during a strike? As with the “hard news” sections, there was no further comment in the opinion pages about the lengthy time of negotiation between the contract expiration and the call for a strike. Neither paper cited this as a major reason for the strike, even though the phrase “other issues” was repeatedly tacked on to statements discussing the impasse after wages and pension issues were mentioned. In other words, while wages and benefits were stated as reasons for the contract impasse (and only discussed in sound-bite sentences), other potential reasons were not, even though those may have been the real drivers behind the impasse. Rather then report or even have an op-ed discussing this side of the issue, the overwhelming majority of the opinion pages of both papers ran decidedly negative views of the strike and the union itself.

The other sixteen letters in the Daily News appeared between October 28 and November 30. Of these, thirteen took a decidedly negative view of the strike and organized labor in general, while only four supported the strike or the general idea of organized labor. Aside from just publishing the letters, in two instances, the Daily News devoted entire opinion sections to the letters, favoring decisively in negative labor attitudes. The first of these two sections appeared on November 10, under the section “Seeing Through the Strike Happy Talk.” Four letters were published in the section, three of which were against the TWU strike. (The lone supporting letter was written in response to a negative op-ed written by columnist Ronnie Polancezky, which will be discussed in more detail later.) Examples of negative statements from the letters:
I was highly amused as I watched the live press conference announcing the SEPTA strike settlement. I really felt for Gov. Rendell and Mayor Nutter as they tried their very best to sound conciliatory in an effort to help the TWU’s Willie Brown save face by repeatedly saying he was only "doing his job." I guess he was only "doing his job" by causing an unnecessary strike that crippled the city, caused people to miss work, lose pay, miss medical appointments, causing ill will toward his membership - only to then accept nearly the SAME contract on the table before this mess began. … It is truly a disgrace at this time for any company to strike. The poor riding public is caught in the middle with no other option but to wait until that fat man sings so the strike can be over! This was a most awful decision and, of course, now he admits it? Who cares? The damage is already done! (47)

The second section of letters, published November 13, actually set up a faux-neutral opinion page called “The readers rate SEPTA vs. the Union.” Three letters were published under that headline, two of three being negative toward unions in the public sector (such as the TWU):

Part of why I bicycle year round is because of how much I detest SEPTA. My blood pressure rises every time I give them money. Certainly most of it is how they're run and their management, but a lot of it is their employees. They're horridous. They're rude. They have no understanding of customer service. They flat out often don't do their jobs. (When was the last time you heard a bus driver announce a stop if the automated system wasn't there?) It's hard to grow up in the Philly area and feel any sympathy for the union. If they did their part, despite poor management, I would have felt differently, but I found myself rooting for scab labor in hopes it might be quasi-competent. (48)

The other letter takes a generally negative tone towards unionized public sector workers:

…every dollar that goes to pay or pensions to a public-sector worker comes from a worker in the private sector. A SEPTA worker retiring now and starting his pension contributed 10 percent of the cost of the pension. Workers in the private sector, who don't have a pension, contributed 90 percent of the SEPTA workers' pension. How is that fair? Society doesn't work well when public-sector jobs pay more and have better benefits than those in the private sector. More and more labor is directed to the public sector, which leads to a drain in public finances. The higher the percentage of total jobs that come from the private sector, the better the economy. The lower the percentage, the worse. (49)

In reading the opinion letters, not only do the majority of writers state they are against the strike, but they go beyond just decrying this strike in particular and hold a decidedly
negative view of organized labor in general. This distinction is important, because it underscores the general perception of the negative view of labor as presented by Perenti, Puette, et al. In other words, if readers are expressing their larger view of organized labor as decidedly negative, not just exclusive to this strike, that reinforces a perception of a larger trend of anti-labor views in the media. For example, one reader wrote:

In tough times, when the city is broke, jobs are being lost and people trying to save money by taking public transportation, I find it appalling that SEPTA workers aren't happy with an 11 percent pay hike over the contract and a $1,250 bonus. SEPTA riders used to being held up by thugs lurking near stations are now held up by the thugs that run the union. Maybe someone should take a page out of President Reagan's air-traffic strike book and fire all of them. (50)

Another example calls for the outright ban on a union’s right to strike:

Thirty-nine states and the District of Columbia have laws that prohibit strikes by transit workers. It is time for Pennsylvania to do the same, which will once and for all put a stop to the abuses by out-of-control unions. It's time the 20 percent of the population that belongs to unions stopped holding the other 80 percent hostage because they refuse to adapt to modern realities and changing times. (51)

One final example of larger anti-union sentiment was simply a one-line letter:

The next time someone complains about spending dollars on Philadelphia’s public schools, just say “Willie Brown.” (52)

Despite the unquestionable one-sidedness in anti-labor sentiment in the opinion letters (and the editorial decisions of which ones and how many to print), it can also be argued that the paper is merely printing what they receive, and it has no control over the amount of and content of letters it receives from the public. The same cannot be said, however, of the paper’s self-penned editorials or syndicated columns. In addition to reader letters, there were four columnist/editorial opinion articles regarding the strike in the Daily News. Three of the four took a decidedly negative tone not only towards the TWU strike action, but also towards labor in general, even going so far as being downright hostile and
engaging in personal attacks in their assessments. In a piece entitled “SEPTA Union Strikes Below the Belt,” Christine Flowers is quite clear in her contempt of organized labor:

My first thought after hearing that SEPTA had gone on strike in the wee hours of Tuesday morning was to wonder if there was space available under the Meadowlands for Willie Brown and his crew. After all, Jimmy Hoffa must get lonely. Then I realized how silly that was. Brown is still alive and kicking, unlike Hoffa, who’s been pushing up daisies since well before Joe "Slippery Fingers" Pisarcik's infamous fumble in '78. In fact, you could say that Brown and his aggrieved SEPTA workers are busy kicking me and hundreds of thousands of other Philly commuters directly in our civic . . . assets. Perhaps I'm being too hard on them. On Wednesday morning, after unsuccessfully attempting to corral a cab, I took a leisurely 30-block stroll from Center City to my office and had an opportunity to appreciate some of the finer points of the city. Who knew there were 375 funeral parlors, 150 Crown Chicken outlets and 435 chiropractors between Chestnut and Oregon? The things you miss when you travel underground. Sarcasm aside (couldn't tell, could you?), the actions by the Transport Workers Union Local 234 have confirmed my low opinion of unions in general, and this union in particular. And please spare me the lectures on how this country was built by union blood, sweat and tears. Don't conjure up tales about the coal miners and steelworkers and bricklayers who married our grandmothers and turned a fledgling nation into a world power. I'm fully aware that once upon a time, unions were the only thing protecting the proletariat against the robber barons, balancing the scales of economic and social justice. But that was then. And this is now. Any attempt by TWU members to try to make us feel sorry for their plight is an insult to those of who actually read the papers. (53)

Two of the other three columns that took a negative stance toward organized labor and the TWU were written by Ronnie Polaneczky, showing much of the same contempt and brash hostility Flowers’ piece did. The first, entitled “To SEPTA strikers: How Dare You” begins:

As a fellow trade-union member, I'm having a big problem with you, solidarity-wise. Not only is your strike strangling the city - keeping kids from school, people from jobs, patients from doctors' appointments - but it's a thumbed-nose to something for which most folks reading this paper would give their back molars: The promise of a paycheck for the next 60 months. I'm thinking about the 400 employees at Crozer Chester Medical Center who lost their jobs this year. And the 22 staffers axed last Thursday at Drinker Biddle & Reath. And the Comcast employees who learned on Wednesday that the cable giant plans to pink-slip a
number of workers, even though the company is enjoying a fabulously profitable year. Hell, it's a promise I wish we had right here at the Daily News. We've lost dozens of staffers in recent years, and the paper's possible demise is a topic of endless speculation. So let me get this straight: Unemployment is rampant in this region, and your union actually chose to strike rather than continue hammering out the details of your already excellent jobs? Jobs that we, the transit-dependent public, need you to perform so that our own financially teetering lives don't crash and burn? Where do you people get off? (54)

The piece then goes on to repeat the meme that it’s the TWU’s fault they did not accept a contract between March and October, and also oversimplifies the details of the contract, not acknowledging there could be non-wage issues effecting the contract refusal.

Polancezky also does not acknowledge that the strike action is what forced the refused contract offer to happen in the first place:

Your good jobs would only get better with SEPTA's opening offer - a deal that Gov. Rendell rightly described as "sensational." The contract calls for you to pocket a signing bonus of $1,250, just for agreeing to the damn thing. It would give you a 2.5 percent raise next year. And a 3 percent annual increase for three years after that. The proposal doesn't require you to donate even a nickel more to your health-care plan. Do you have any clue how sweet that is? It even comes with an offer to increase pension contributions to 11 percent over the next five years. I know, your leadership disputes that figure. But at least you still have a pension to argue about. Not everyone is so lucky. Yet you looked at all of this and said, "Let's walk out." (55)

Polancezky’s second piece, entitled “Frustrated Commuters Deride Strikers” reinforces the emphasis on other workers, not the union membership, and how they have been inconvenienced by the strike:

Most readers were disgusted that union members wouldn't sign a good contract, which offered guaranteed raises and no increases in health-care costs, when so many people are unable to find jobs. "I am one of many people who have been out of work for over 6 months," wrote J. Cullen. "I did not get an increase in my salary for two years prior to my layoff." Added reader Rob Todd: "The sense of entitlement from these people is nauseating!!! I hope they get Ronald Reagan'd, circa early '80s - fired. Bring in new people who appreciate gainful employment, where job security and fair compensation is valued and not taken for granted." And many had tales
that ought to make Transport Workers Union Local 234 President Willie Brown hang his head in shame. (56)

The important omission to question (as with the coverage which was discussed previously) is that in these op-eds, there is no blame placed on the city government or SEPTA management for also being responsible for a six-month period of no new contract ratification for SEPTA. A recurring theme in many of the opinionated quotes seem to harbor jealously towards a good middle class living SEPTA is helping provide. Rather than hoping to aspire to those types of good jobs, people in most of the quotes revert to being generally angry about a bad economic situation (the Great Recession). With the media’s help in they way the story was covered, most people quoted sided plainly with the city government, even though the strike was just as much a result of their inability to reach a solution with the union. There is also no thorough scrutiny of actual contractual issues on the table. Aside from the personal attacks on the union leadership, all three of these pieces take issue with standard cost of living increases, making them sound more than they are (saying 11% over five years rather than showing the small yearly incremental raises), and also do not acknowledge it was the strike action that brought the city government to finally offer a contract that would have otherwise not occurred. It is the reinforcements of such memes that contributes to the negative media perceptions and views of organized labor.

Aside from the overwhelming negative view of organized labor in the op-ed pages of the Daily News, the Philadelphia Inquirer’s opinion pages of the same timeframe show a similar pattern of coverage. Not only are the negative traits reinforced, but also the idea that centralized ownership reinforces hegemony in coverage. There was little, if any, diversity in coverage of the SEPTA strike in the Inquirer’s pages. Using the same search
parameters in Lexis Nexis as in the previous section, there were only five letters to the editor in the *Inquirer* related to the strike. Four of the five took a decidedly negative tone in their view of the strike – the lone supportive letter took the view that strikes are necessary for a union to have power in negotiations, and that there is never a “good time” to strike. From the reader letters:

*I didn't think anyone could equal Wall Street bankers for arrogance and selfishness, but the SEPTA transit union did. In a time when workers across the nation are losing jobs and health insurance, the SEPTA union rejected a contract that guaranteed them raises and no increase in their insurance costs. Then they went on strike without warning, in the middle of the night. SEPTA management, the mayor, and the governor should have offered the union less than the contract they rejected.* (57)

And:

*I'm pro-union. However, in this case, the Transport Workers Union has made a terrible mistake. Negotiation involves power, and the union has very little. Everyone finds the union greedy, asking for more and more while the rest of us subsist on less and less. It's hard for the union to claim that social justice is on its side. This strike is an enormous hardship - one that falls especially on people who start out economically distressed. On the other hand, the bus drivers are already living relatively comfortably on up to $24.50 per hour, plus health insurance and pension. Workers should know that in the court of public opinion, the union, not the management has already been condemned.*9 (58)

As with the *Daily News*, the editorials that ran in the *Inquirer* during the strike were decidedly negative towards the TWU and its strike action. The *Inquirer’s* editorial pages also struck a similar tone with the frequency of coverage and how that coverage was framed during the contract expiration in March 2009, and the actual strike period in October/November 2009. Much like the *Daily News* running an op-ed by Willie Brown

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9 Despite the writer’s claim of being “pro-union,” the rest of her statement claims the union has little power to do anything, yet decries the one tool the union has for power – a strike, and calls it a mistake. Based on that reading, the author has decided to call this a “negative labor view” reader letter.
during that pre-strike period when the TWU contract first expired, the Inquirer published an editorial on March 12, 2009 entitled “SEPTA talks: In No Mood to Strike.” The piece not only praised the union for foregoing a strike action and working work with the city in good faith, but also states that most of what the union was seeking for their new contract was reasonable:

Drivers, mechanics and other SEPTA workers rarely have been in a better position to reach fair but reasonable labor contracts, so it's good to hear both the Transport Workers Union Local 234 and transit agency managers say this is no time for a strike. The key elements for labor peace are twofold: SEPTA isn't broke, and its unions also realize that - in addition to being secure in their jobs - they're negotiating amid the biggest national economic crisis in decades. The contract covering 4,700 bus, train and trolley operators expires Saturday night, and the talks entered the final week with both sides said to be far apart on key issues. But the lack of a union strike vote through yesterday was a good sign, along with conciliatory remarks by TWU Local 234 president Willie Brown and SEPTA general manager Joseph M. Casey.... On wages, SEPTA has budgeted for a marginal increase in personnel costs - if not quite at the TWU's pipe-dream opening bid for a 6-percent pay hike. For its part, the TWU hopes to share in some of the economic-stimulus work slated to go to SEPTA contractors - hardly an unreasonable demand. The overall cost of this settlement, though, has to come in on the conservative end of the scale. SEPTA's balanced budget could go south in no time if the agency doesn't keep modernizing, boosting service, and reeling in the cost of pensions. (59)

Despite noting in this op-ed that wages weren’t the only issue on the table (outsourcing, seniority shift picking rights and how federal stimulus money was being used by SEPTA were others) and that the union was willing to engage in negotiation first and not strike, none of these points were ever discussed in any detail in the paper from March to October of that year. Just as in the Daily News coverage, the union went from being reasonable negotiators to demonized for striking. Also in similarity of the two papers in their editorial opinion pages is the amount of coverage – no real discussion of the contract or the issues surrounding it in the six months leading up to the strike. When the strike occurred, however, coverage increased, and it was treated as if it was avoidable and the
union was solely to blame for not reaching an agreement. The negative view of labor carried over into the four editorials run in the Inquirer in November 2009. The first, by columnist Karen Heller entitled “A Lot of Nerve For a Guy Who Drives to Work”, takes personal jabs at Willie Brown in addition to denouncing the strike, much like the Flowers column in the *Daily News*:

You have to admire the massive brakes of SEPTA union boss Willie Brown. He authorized TWU Local 234's World Series surprise 3 a.m. strike Tuesday, which put the city in one perpetual traffic jam, stranding the very sort of workers (and their children) he represents. "I understand I'm the most hated man in Philadelphia right now," Brown said. "I have no problem with that." When the "It's Our Money" blog's Ben Waxman asked Brown how it felt to be as reviled as A-Rod, Brown almost blushed, saying, "I feel kind of honored to be in the same class, the same conversation as Alex Rodriguez. That's pretty OK." Uh, no, W-Bro, it's not pretty OK. Also, kind of dumb to tell Waxman you drive to work. Brown refused to negotiate with Michael Nutter - the mayor said they met for the first time last week - dubbing him "Little Caesar." *Little Caesar*? The 1931 gangster movie starring Edward G. Robinson? Ancient reference, no? And wouldn't Bro be the one more aptly cast as Little Caesar, the kind of guy who tells authorities, "Listen, you crummy, flat-footed copper, I'll show you whether I've lost my nerve and my brains"? (60)

The column also claims the union was being greedy, expecting to much because other workers do not have it so good, even making the claim it was pension negotiations that were prolonging the strike, without any real proof or explanation:

As unemployment hit 10.2 percent and the temperature was expected to drop to 32 degrees, SEPTA workers held out for greater contributions to their pension. Look, many laborers have pensions that are stone-cold frozen. They've gone years without mandated raises, and are now facing pay cuts - preferable to the layoffs plaguing many industries. They don't know what a signing bonus looks like. Who gets signing bonuses besides ballplayers? Oh, that's where the A-Rod comparison comes in. Unlike SEPTA employees, many workers contribute to their health-care coverage because that's what living in this economy means. (61)

The other three editorials that ran in the *Inquirer* echo this sentiment, making many of the same negative labor claims that op-eds of the *Daily News* did. The first, entitled “Bus
to Nowhere,” reinforced the notion of commuter inconvenience and placing the blame squarely on the union:

Transit strikes always burden commuters, but the timing of yesterday's walkout by SEPTA employees was especially unfair. Transport Workers Union Local 234 went on strike at 3 a.m. with virtually no warning to the traveling public. More than 5,000 train operators, bus drivers, and mechanics did not report to work, shutting down all subway, bus, and trolley service in the city and bus lines in some suburbs. That action left many people who must travel to and from work before dawn without any options. It was a cavalier way to treat loyal customers who depend on SEPTA to get to work or school. The union had authorized a strike a week ago, but many people went to bed Monday night believing a walkout had been averted. The union had agreed under pressure from Gov. Rendell and other elected leaders not to strike during the World Series. But three hours after Game 5 ended in South Philly, the union walked. So it was strike three for many working stiffs - a waitress trying to ride the Market-Frankford El to her job at a diner in Old City; hospital workers in Center City trying to get home after an overnight shift; a woman who was stranded on the first day of her new job. It was the same for tens of thousands of other riders like them, many of whom don't earn as much as the average SEPTA employee ($52,000). (62)

As the op-ed continues, curiously, once again, it is noted in passing that wages were not the only reason for the impasse and subsequent strike, but is never discussed any further:

As for SEPTA’s offer, it hardly seems like the kind of affront that would spark a walkout, especially in these tough economic times. Rendell said SEPTA proposed a $1,250 signing bonus upon ratification, a 2.5-percent raise the second year, and 3-percent raises in each of the next three years. The union is asking for raises of 4 percent annually and improved work rules. (63)

The second op-ed, published the next day and called “Union Strikes Out” calls the strike a direct affront to public safety because of a regional rail (which was not on strike) train fire:

No matter how long this SEPTA strike lasts, let's hope Day 2 was rock bottom. It couldn't get much worse. An R5 Paoli train caught fire yesterday during the morning rush, just outside the Overbrook station. A SEPTA official said the likely cause was electrical. The train was packed with nearly 700 passengers. Nobody was injured, but the suburban commuter line was shut down for two hours, complicating an already chaotic rush hour. Many commuters walked off the tracks to look for alternatives. Others waited for help from SEPTA. SEPTA spokesman
Richard Maloney said the transit agency tried to send "rescue" buses to the scene to transport stranded passengers, but pickets from Transport Workers Local 234 prevented the buses from leaving the Victory terminal at 69th Street. Victory Division buses serve Delaware County and the Main Line, and its employees are not on strike. But the pickets from the city division allowed buses to move about once every 45 minutes, and SEPTA got only four buses to the burned-out train. "Despicable," Maloney said. Eventually, the city sent school buses to pick up some of the passengers. The massive inconvenience of a strike is a given. But compounding a potential public safety hazard, by blocking buses intended to retrieve passengers who escaped a fire, takes the union's irresponsibility to a different level. (64)

It is important to note that the claim of union workers blocking buses from picking up stranded passengers came from a SEPTA spokesperson, who was on the other side of the negotiating table from the union. The op-ed quotes no union members or shows that it made an attempt to find out what their version of events was. It is not unreasonable to suggest that the striking members did not even know why the buses were being dispatched. It is also important to note that the editorial is conflating public safety with convenience. All commuters got off the train safely, and they were not in harm’s way after getting off the train. The claim that buses coming to pick these commuters up after being stranded is necessary to avoid a direct affront to their safety might also be classified as a bit of a stretch. Be that as it may, the editorial clearly sides against the union in that particular situation, without quoting or speaking with anyone involved in the incident from that perspective.

The third Inquirer editorial, from November 10, two days after the strike ended, calls for the end of the right for the TWU to be able to strike. Entitled “Detour Transit Strikes,” the piece has the most obvious negative view of labor of all three of the editorials:

The SEPTA strike that ended yesterday wasn't worth holding a city and a region hostage. For six days, Transport Workers Union Local 234 threw the commuting
public into turmoil. And when the strike ended, the union accepted an offer that was much like the one it had walked away from last week - an overly generous deal in tough economic times. The union's 5,000 drivers and mechanics will receive bonuses of $1,250 just for ratifying the new contract, plus 11.5 percent in raises over the next five years. The leadership of Local 234 held out for better work rules and slightly enhanced pensions. SEPTA employees felt justified in striking, but they must know that the people who depend on them to get to work and school don't share that view. The public is especially resentful because Local 234 used commuters as pawns, once again, in a game that the union feels it can't lose. Resentful or not, many commuters need mass transit. But the union did lose, big time, in the court of public opinion. Does the union care? The public already knows the answer to that - an answer that was delivered at 3 a.m. Nov. 3 without warning when Local 234 shut down all buses, trains, and trolleys in the city. It was no way to treat the customers who pay their salaries. So great is the union's leverage in these periodic walkouts that some have suggested SEPTA and its unions should agree to binding arbitration. SEPTA has resisted, but this option should at least be explored. The cumulative impact of transit strikes has dealt another blow to the region's reputation as a reliable place to do business, especially when 39 other states have outlawed strikes by public-sector employees. (65)

The piece not only calls for the outright ban on public sector union strike ability (the rationale apparently being so many other states already have) but also calls into question SEPTA’s resistance to binding arbitration (an impasse solution that could avoid future strikes – and a resolution the TWU was willing to accept to solve this contract particular contract dispute). Nowhere in the piece, or other coverage for that matter is binding arbitration discussed as a viable impasse solution in lieu of striking, yet places all of the blame for the strike action on the union.
Chapter 4: Conclusion

As this case study illustrates, there are many problems with the way the mainstream American news media presents its coverage of organized labor news. Previous research has studied portrayals of unions in film and television, showing that there is an overarching emphasis on corruption and violence in fictional organized labor representation. Subsequent examinations of organized labor in the news has shown through various case studies that there is an overemphasis on news content of strike actions, and within that coverage, there is another overemphasis on the effect on consumers. By framing the coverage this way, media overplays the effects of strike rather than causes, which undermines giving reasonable coverage or explanation for strike actions from the union’s point of view. Part of the reasons for these negative views of organized labor is the consolidation of media outlets and the for profit capitalist model of which the media is a part.

All of the negative traits previous researchers have found manifested themselves clearly in news coverage of a 2009 strike in Philadelphia. Subsequent analysis of two jointly owned newspapers covering the strike in that city not only clearly treat this strike action and union position in a negative light, but also provide no substantial difference in diversity of opinion or viewpoint regarding the issue – the coverage of the strike between the two papers is frighteningly homogenous.

Despite this solid base of research, there are still some areas that require further study. Most research up to this point seems to focus mainly on private sector union media coverage. A more thorough study of labor coverage of public sector union coverage should be attempted. More specifically, does coverage of CEO/ownership in the private
sector fit congruently with coverage of politicians/management in the public sector? Also, a more thorough cross-genre examination is needed. Does television differ from newspapers in this coverage, for example? Does it differ across media genres from public to private sector? Does it differ from jointly owned media ventures compared more diverse areas of media ownership? Examining how this negative media coverage impacts union membership would also be a welcome addition to this area of research. Do areas that have negative union coverage have higher or lower levels of union membership?

As for the greater implications of this particular treatment of organized labor in the press, it can be seen as a solid divider of class consciousness. If the media chose to present these issues in such a way that those dominant frames of consumer emphasis, union greed, and inconvenience were not so prevalent, perhaps a more favorable impact on public awareness could be reached. For example, instead of middle class workers being pitted against each other in these news stories based on individualized greed and jealousy, if a more balanced message can be presented for the working class, class solidarity may be possible. A more pro-union message could have led to a larger public actions, such as a general strike or shutdown, which would very not just help the conditions of unionized employees, but all middle/working class laborers in general. However, as this case study demonstrates, the dominant news frame remains division, not solidarity. Organized labor is still a vital part of the American workforce, mainly in the public sector, but also in a small but vibrant part of the private sector. Having a more reasonable equitable discussion regarding the issues that surround it could have a lasting impact on not only the quality of the news media, but also for the American workforce.
Notes

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
33. “SEPTA, Transport Union In Talks To Avert Strike
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