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**Managing labour conflict through language in the neoliberal era:  
public sector strikes in the UK and South Africa**

This article highlights both the differences and the common points in the discourse of two governments vis-à-vis trade union protests in the public sector. The comparison is between two English-speaking countries, Great Britain and South Africa, where the cultural-political settings of the protests are quite different and, consequently, governmental reactions to them necessarily take such differences into due consideration.

The history of the two trade union movements and their relationship with the rest of society, which is part of the political culture of a country, have many points of divergence as well as some similarities. Moreover, the two moments in history that are used to illustrate such differences are quite distant from one another: the British ‘Winter of discontent’ of 1978-79 and the 2010 public sector strike in South Africa. Nonetheless, both the events and political practices dealt with in this study are placed inside the same socio-historical context: that of the long wave of neoliberal hegemony.

The study is post-disciplinary in its implications (Jessop and Sum 2001), while on a more operational level it adopts a pragma-dialectical approach to argumentation theory (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992; van Eemeren, Grootendorst and Krugier 1987; Ietcu 2006) combined with Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) in its Hallidayan version (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004). Disciplines such as political economy and history are used to clarify the context in which the discourse takes place and to select the most meaningful genres – conceived of as institutionalized ways of acting semiotically (Fairclough 2006) – and texts for the creation of the corpus.

The analysis will show how the different political cultures, as well as the historical-economic contexts, influence both the rhetorical strategies and the use of language, especially at the experiential level, notwithstanding the inevitable similarities descending from the need to implement locally the neoliberal “planetary vulgate” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2001).