"Well, does it look like the miners' strike?" Mainstream media's critical narrative frames during the 2022 RMT strikes.

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POLI31555

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2024/2025

This dissertation is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of BSc in Politics and International Relations.

I declare that the research contained herein was granted approval by the SPAIS Ethics Working Group.

Ethics approval reference: 22707.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, for their unending love and support, without whom I would not have made it through my first term at university.

I would like to acknowledge my supervisor, Dr Neil Matthews, for his generosity of time and support at every stage of this project (of which there have been many), and last but not least my Politics & IR girls: Freya, Emily and Amy.

ABSTRACT.

In the context of the cost-of-living crisis, 2022 saw trade unions stage widespread strikes across Britain. The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT), striking over pay, jobs and conditions, was at the forefront of this return to a more 'confrontational' trade unionism, after a trajectory of decline in union membership and militancy since the 1980s. Existing literature has noted the uniquely left-wing and politicised approach of the RMT, and its General Secretary Mick Lynch, whose frequent media appearances prior to his retirement granted him a prominence within British political discourse which is unparalleled amongst contemporary trade union leaders.

This study contributes to academic understandings of one of the most 'militant' unions active today, via an analysis of the critical narrative frames used by the media when covering the RMT's 2022 rail strikes. It examines the key themes of those understandings of the dispute which were constructed by the media, and thus builds upon existing literature concerning the history of mainstream media's approach to modern trade unionism. The 1984-85 miners' strike is employed—as both a case of notoriously hostile media treatment of industrial action, and as a strike commonly invoked as singularly symbolic of the fate of trade unionism in (post-)Thatcherite Britain—as a comparative tool by which changes and continuities within the media's critical interpretations of trade unionism may be assessed.

Three dominant themes are identified within coverage of the RMT strikes: a 'feudal' presentation of the RMT as 'greedy', an 'aggressor/victim' binary, and an emphasis on the union's 'militancy' as rendering it a 'regressive' political force. Considerable continuities are demonstrated within media approaches to trade unionism since the miners' strike, while the emergence of 'pandemic' semiotics as a discursive tool is also identified. This study thus updates academic understandings and characterisations of media hostility towards trade unionism, and contributes to literature both on the RMT, as arguably the most prominent union within contemporary Britain, and on discourses surrounding 2022's spike in strike action more broadly.

Word Count: 9988.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.

NUM – National Union of Mineworkers.

RMT – National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers.

TUA – Trade Union Act (2016).

INTRODUCTION.

In 2022, economic instability and rampant inflation saw 'widespread worker discontent' in various sectors across Britain, of a depth capable of 'overturn[ing]' traditional 'reticence' towards industrial action (Milner 2022; 40). Leading here was the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT), whose members voted overwhelmingly for indefinite strike action over jobs, pay and conditions, beginning June 21st (BBC 2022a). The RMT is noted for its particularly left-wing politics, and a 'militant' preference for strike action over 'social partnership' (Milner 2022: 42; Gallas 2018: 248). As such, the union and its high-profile leader, Mick Lynch, attracted especially critical attention from both a Conservative government adopting a harder 'anti-union' line, and much of the mainstream press (Darlington 2009a: 5-7; Milner 2022: 43).

The nature of this media attention—so far under-examined by existing literature—is the focus of this study, which draws on existing analysis of British media's coverage of trade unionism, and particularly that of the National Union of Mineworkers' (NUM) 1984-85 strike, which is infamous for the criticism it received from the mainstream media (Williams 2009: 42), and its legacy as 'epitomis[ing]' the 'fate of both organised labour and the working class' in post-Thatcherite Britain (Nettleingham 2017: 854). Indeed, comparisons between the RMT and the NUM have often been made by the media (Darlington 2009a: 7). The study thus seeks to address the following research question and sub-questions:

> *What are the dominant themes of the union-critical narratives used by mainstream media to frame the 2022 RMT strikes?*
>
> - *How are these themes employed within this coverage?*
> - *How do these themes compare to those present within mainstream media coverage of the 1984-85 miners' strike?*

The methods by which these questions are addressed are outlined in chapter one: a discursive analytical approach is applied to strike coverage produced by news outlets from the centre to the right of the

political spectrum, where the union-critical narratives this study concerns itself with are expected to be most prevalent, as well as three 'viral' interviews conducted with Mick Lynch during the strikes.

Three dominant narratives emerge, which are discussed in chapters two through four. The strikes were frequently interpreted via a 'feudal framing', wherein union leaders were presented as 'barons' leading an antidemocratic, overly-powerful organisation; an 'aggressor/victim' binary, which pitted the union, as an 'aggressor', against a victimised and conceptually-distinct 'Britain'; and a presentation of the 'militancy' of the RMT as constituting a 'return to the 1970s/80s'.

These themes demonstrate considerable continuity with media coverage from previous decades, and particularly the miners' strike, despite the regularisation undergone by trade unionism since this era; furthermore, the study observes how the miners' strike itself has become a resource used to frame contemporary industrial action. Its findings thus offer an updated examination of the media's constructed understandings of trade unionism, in this contemporary era of strike action 'resurgence' (Milner 2022: 40).

CHAPTER ONE. LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY.

1.1 Literature Review.

1.1.1 The contemporary RMT and the 2022 'summer of discontent'.

This dissertation builds upon—and contributes to—existing literature on the Nation Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT), by examining the critical narrative frames constructed by media coverage of RMT strike action, and the core themes therein (as well as how these themes compare to those identified in coverage of the 1984-85 miners' strike). The RMT has proven a compelling subject for analysis of contemporary British trade unionism, by a literature which repeatedly notes the union's exceptionally left-wing, 'militant' operation (Darlington 2009a; Darlington 2009b; Gallas 2018; Boyle 2024), in a period where such traditionally confrontational unionism has (until recently) been largely dismissed as 'outdated' (Boyle 2024: 3), and union membership has declined (Darlington 2009b: 85). Thus far, academic attention—particularly the contributions of Darlington (2009a; 2009b)—has concentrated on the organisational strategy of the RMT, which has allowed it to revitalise and politicise its membership against a broader trend of union decline since the 1980s.

Darlington (2009b: 85) outlines the union's 'explicit rejection of social partnership…in favour of resistance and strike mobilisation' as a 'path to reinvigoration of union organisation', wherein the RMT repeatedly challenged, and distanced itself from, New Labour's platform of public-private partnerships and a 'refusal' to consider 're-nationalisation of the railways' (Darlington 2009a: 6). The politicised reputation of the RMT is well-documented, with literature from Gallas (2018: 246-248) examining the union's assertive stance during the austerity of the 2010-2015 coalition, which saw the RMT insert itself into political discussion 'beyond the trade union spectrum' to fill a 'vacuum' created by a Labour Party 'waver[ing]' over public-spending cuts which the RMT 'resoundingly rejected'.

There is thus a broad consensus within the literature which characterises the RMT as 'one of the most militant and left-wing trade unions' in contemporary British politics (Darlington 2009a: 5). Accordingly, examinations of the 'summer of discontent', which saw a 'spike' in strike action in the

UK in 2022, against the backdrop of the cost-of-living crisis (Boyle 2024: 2), repeatedly position the RMT—and notably, compared to his 'largely anonymous' counterparts, the union's General Secretary, Mick Lynch—at the forefront of this surge of confrontational unionism (Boyle 2024; Milner 2022). Both Boyle (2024: 7) and Milner (2022: 42) note Lynch's role in 'emphasis[ing] political responsibility for the strikes', which has subsequently cast him as the champion of a revitalised union 'militance' and preference for strike action as an 'instrument of political protest' (Gallas 2018: 250). Assessments of the union's platform thus provide a valuable body of work, which situates the RMT as a prominent player in contemporary trade unionism, worthy of greater examination.

As a traditionally left-wing union, the RMT is generally understood to attract particular media hostility (Darlington 2009a: 7; Milner 2022: 42; Boyle 2024: 3). Despite this, a tendency to focus on the union's own conduct has produced a distinct lack of research concerning the nature of this apparent media hostility—research into the RMT's interaction with the media generally concerns itself with the efficacy of the union's messaging, rather than the constructed frames through which the media interacts with, and disseminates, these messages. Relevant here is Boyle's (2024: 2) study of Mick Lynch's (numerous) media engagements during the rail strikes, which outlined a 'collective action frame' whereby Lynch related the identity of union members with that of the wider public audience, against the common 'antagonists' of employers and the government. Within this research, Boyle (2024: 12-15) acknowledges several media 'talking points' which Lynch responded to, including characterisations of him as a 'Marxist' owing to his left-wing politics, and the positioning of the RMT as an 'aggressor…employing disproportionate' use of strike action. This analysis thus invites a complementary study of how the media, in turn, sought to narrate this same dispute.

1.1.2 The British media and its coverage of trade unionism.

Literature concerning media coverage of contemporary trade unionism frequently acknowledges a dominant disapproval of strike action—chiming with Curran and Seaton's (2009: 69) broader analysis of the development of the modern British media, which charts a 'move to the right' in the political

'balance' of the media since the 1970s. However, more recent examinations of the relations between the media and trade unions have noted, on the part of the unions, a growing sophistication in their handling and use of the media—for instance, through the increased use of press officers (Routledge 2007). With the development of 'new media', multiple studies by Hodder and Houghton (2019; 2021) have examined unions' use of social media—at the same time as they have acknowledged a marked contraction both in unions' political influence, and their membership, over the last fifty years (Routledge 2007: 33; Boyle 2024: 3).

For understanding the context of the RMT's industrial action, of particular value is Gallas' (2018) assessment of a resurgence in strike action since the austerity measures implemented by the 2010-2015 coalition government. Gallas (2018: 246-250) describes the subsequent reduction in government-union 'consultation' during this period as tantamount to a 'return to the Thatcherite era', as unions—despite their relatively weak position—revived a 'more independent approach' to 'working-class political representation', which favoured the use of strike action, if initially only of a 'defensive and symbolic nature'. After Thatcher's Conservatives dismantled the power of the unions in the 1980s, Gallas (2018: 240-241) marks the New Labour era as a period of greater union 'consultation' and reduced confrontation—thus, as he argues that government-union relations eroded after 2010 and a preference for strike action returned, he identifies the Conservatives' 2016 Trade Union Act (TUA) as a renewal in right-wing circles of the 'myth of unions as forces of destruction', citing 'the alleged damage caused by striking workers…as a justification for the act'.

Existing literature thus charts a trajectory of increasingly confrontational union strategy, with the 2022 wave of strike action seeing this spread beyond merely those traditionally 'militant' unions (Milner 2022: 40). Yet analyses of the narratives constructed in response to this trajectory constitute a gap in this body of work. An exception is Coscia and Ravenhill's (2024: 296-299) study of 'news media representations of the Trade Union Act (2016)', which they hail as 'one of the most significant pieces of industrial relations legislation since the Employment Act 1980' in its contribution to a steady 'narrowing [of] the terms of legal industrial action' (via the introduction of various new requirements surrounding balloting procedures and legitimate picketing). Their examination of media discussions of

the act identified themes of ‘law, order and democracy’, wherein trade unions were presented as ‘representing sectional interests, being inimical to consumer rights, and operating outside of civil society and the law’ and their activities tended to be framed as ‘potentially unlawful’ (Coscia and Ravenhill 2024: 203).

Coscia and Ravenhill’s (2024: 204-206) research did identify sympathy for the unions in some mainstream media outlets (namely The Guardian), through criticism of the 2016 TUA; however, across all media examined, recurring (and thus pervasive) frames employed included one of ‘feudal and hereditary privilege’, which portrayed union leaders as ‘unelected aristocrats’ enjoying ‘unearned privilege[s]’. In addition, a ‘clampdown/crackdown trope’ was frequently used, connoting illegal and illicit behaviour [by the unions] which requires restriction by public…authorities’ (Coscia and Ravenhill 2024: 203). Finally, ‘militaristic metaphors’ were also commonly recognised, and their use was related to Hart’s (2017) study of media coverage of the 1984-85 miners’ strike: in both cases, militaristic framings serve to delegitimise strike action, while legitimising measures taken by the government against unions, positioning the dispute as a two-sided conflict wherein the union represents an ‘enemy’ (Hart in Coscia and Ravenhill 2024: 206-207). Coscia and Ravenhill’s (2024) observations, regarding relatively contemporary narratives employed by the British media when covering trade unionism, thus provide a compelling basis on which further analysis of the media’s response to the 2022 ‘spike’ in industrial action may be conducted (Boyle 2024: 2).

1.1.3 Themes of coverage from the 1984-85 miners’ strike.

Discussions of twenty-first-century trade unionism in Britain repeatedly hark back to the 1984-85 miners’ strike, as a notorious case of an industrial dispute, whose consequences—both politically and socially—continue to be felt and acknowledged within characterisations of the contemporary labour movement (Coscia and Ravenhill 2024: Darlington 2009a; Moore and Taylor 2021). Nettleingham (2017: 851) consequently positions the striking miners as a ‘canonical generation’, whose defeat was pivotal for British trade unionism; a study of contemporary militant unionism may therefore draw on

the wealth of academic attention granted to the miners' strike, in order to mount a comparison between two disputes which situates the RMT's operation within a broader history of British labour politics, and particularly of media attitudes towards politicised industrial action. The aforementioned refinement of unions' engagement with the media since the turn of the century (Routledge 2007; Hodder and Houghton 2019; Hodder and Houghton 2021), and particularly Mick Lynch's 'widely-acknowledge[d]' skill for 'distilling key messages' via the media (Boyle 2024: 2) prompt the question as to whether these developments alone—compared to the National Union of Mineworkers' (NUM) less sophisticated press strategy (Buckley 2015: 429)—have produced tangible changes in media framings of industrial action, especially in shifting away from traditional antagonisms.

Media hostility towards the miners' strike is well-examined (Hollingsworth 1986; Wade 1985; Williams 2009; Waddington 2017; Phillips 2016). The distinct narrative frames through which these hostilities were expressed constitute valuable comparative tools for further research into their contemporary counterparts, allowing for an understanding of how a shifting political climate has either altered or preserved them. Such potential is demonstrated by Hart's (2017: 14) study of coverage of the miners' strike, wherein a 'war frame' is commonly realised via 'three main elements of place, participants, and instrument/means', and the resonance this theme finds in Coscia and Ravenhill's (2024: 206) identification of 'militaristic metaphors' in coverage of the 2016 TUA. Myers' (2024: 71) analysis of the strike as evidencing a shift by the government from 'mediation to mediatisation' of industrial disputes, wherein the press is utilised to 'manage public communication and opinion', similarly notes several recurring angles within coverage by a mainstream media which was overwhelmingly ill-disposed to the NUM.

Myers (2024: 80, 84) describes a 'high politics' approach, wherein the unpopularity of the NUM's leader, Arthur Scargill, was exploited by a press which 'personified [the dispute] around named individuals' and thus obscured the 'agency' of 'ordinary workers', in addition to emphasising (and often exaggerating) the hard-left politics of both the union and Scargill himself, thus 'stigmati[sing]' the NUM, and encouraging the public to 'conflate strike activity with other hostile groups' deemed part of 'the fascist Left' (Hollingsworth 1986: 268). Narratives framing the miners' strike as a radical-left threat

to democracy are echoed in both Coscia and Ravenhill's (2024) study of the 2016 TUA, and Boyle's (2024: 12-13) study of Mick Lynch's interactions with the media, suggesting a continuity in the character of mainstream media coverage between the two periods of strike action, which would benefit from further attention—with a focus on the RMT being especially appropriate for such a study, given the media's own penchant for comparison between the RMT's operation and the notorious 'hard-left' politics of 'Scargillism' (Darlington 2009a: 7).

This opportunity for further research thus forms the basis of this dissertation's examination of media coverage of the 2022 RMT strikes, contributing to (and drawing upon) both literature concerning the RMT, and examinations of mainstream media narratives regarding trade unionism, within a contemporary context of revitalised industrial action (Milner 2022: 40). In doing so, it also investigates those continuities suggested by Coscia and Ravenhill's (2024: 206) research, between media framings of the 1984-85 miners' strike—as analysed by a wealth of existing literature—and contemporary strike action, thus contributing to a broader understanding of the development of media narratives regarding a political labour movement which the RMT has, in recent years, sat at the forefront of (Boyle 2024).

1.2 Methodology.

1.2.1 Methodology and methods.

This study takes a constructivist analytical approach to examining the narrative frames employed by media coverage of the 2022 rail strikes, approaching these frames as 'social constructs', whose meanings are produced via interpretation (Parsons 2012: 80, 83). In accordance with a qualitative interest in the core themes of these narratives, the findings of a critical discursive analysis of the linguistic tools which the media uses to construct specific meanings, when arranged thematically, offer insight into the overarching or 'dominant' narratives the media disseminates, and which arguments it serves either to 'privilege' or delegitimise (Burnham et al. 2008: 251-253). Furthermore, a discussion of this analysis against the dominant themes of media coverage of the miners' strike introduces a comparative element, which draws upon discursive analyses conducted within existing literature.

1.2.2 Data collection.

The primary data examined here consists of a sample of 85 articles taken from five online newspaper outlets, and three one-on-one TV interviews conducted with Mick Lynch, the General Secretary of the RMT. In accordance with a focus on *union-critical* coverage of the strikes, the news outlets selected—comprising both broadsheets and tabloids—have been chosen for their perceived ideological position, ranging from the centre to the right of the political spectrum (YouGov 2017). They are thus expected to be predisposed to a more critical view of the strikes than their left-leaning counterparts, and within this criteria, the five most widely-read online newspapers in 2022 (Ofcom 2022)—*The Independent, The Times, The Telegraph, The MailOnline,* and *The Sun*—have been selected.

Articles were sourced via the Gale OneFile News archive, wherein results for the search "rail strike" were filtered to include only those listed as an "article", and published from the 21st to the 25th of June 2022, covering the initial period of the RMT's alternating strike action. Articles bearing only a partial relevance, including those primarily discussing major events affected by the strikes, the broader 'summer of discontent', or Labour Party politics in response to the strikes, were excluded—as were those exclusively listing the rail services in operation, with no meaningful commentary on the dispute itself.

The three Mick Lynch interviews analysed, all broadcast during, or just before, the initial strike period, have been sampled purposively to supplement the discursive analysis of the articles. Two come from television—Richard Madeley and Ranvir Singh for *Good Morning Britain,* and Kay Burley for *Sky News Breakfast*—with the final interview sourced from *Piers Morgan Uncensored* on *TalkTV.* Television was the most-used news source by adults in the UK in 2022 (Ofcom 2022), and these three interviews received particular attention—arguably amounting to internet 'virality'—during the strikes (Solomon 2022; The Guardian 2022; Kersley 2022). They were noted both for the interviewers' line of questioning (which, interestingly, attracted some criticism), and for Lynch's responses, as a union leader renowned for his media skills (Boyle 2024: 2). The attention granted to these interviews made

them news stories in their own right, and meant they contributed greatly to the dominant discourses concerning the strike. They acted as a dynamic two-way arena for dialogue between competing narratives, and are therefore compelling material for discursive analysis.

1.2.3 Limitations.

Several limitations are acknowledged within this study. Firstly, to bring the dataset within the scope of this project, media has been sampled largely from a limited date range which, while allowing for a comprehensive overview of the initial coverage of the strikes, prevents this research from accommodating for how coverage developed over what was ultimately a protracted dispute.

Furthermore, the analysis of only centre-to-right newspaper outlets precludes an understanding of coverage of the strikes from media entities beyond these political criteria; while a right-wing focus is appropriate for this study—which asks not whether union-critical narratives frames are *present* (or, indeed, effective), but, where they *are* present, what the key themes of their construction are—it inevitably produces an incomplete portrait of the broader media discourses surrounding the rail strikes.

1.3 Conclusion.

The discursive analysis conducted across the sampled media identifies three distinct narrative frames within the coverage to be discussed in the following chapters, each containing three sub-themes which are employed via various linguistic tools. Chapter two examines the use of 'tropes of feudal privilege' within the media, and the presentation of the RMT as 'greedy', relating to Coscia and Ravenhill's (2024: 206-208) identification of the 'feudal' frame in their study of coverage of the 2016 TUA. Chapter three concerns an 'aggressor/victim' binary, where the RMT is cast the dispute's aggressor, in opposition to the British public as a distinct 'victim', while chapter four analyses the media's emphasis on (or exaggeration of) the 'militancy' and political radicalism of the RMT, associating its operation with an outdated or regressive form of industrial relations, reminiscent of 1970s/1980s trade unionism.

CHAPTER TWO. ‘FEUDAL’ PRIVILEGE AND THE RMT AS GREEDY.

2.1 Analysis.

A ‘feudal’ theme is frequently used to frame the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers’ (RMT) operation. Union leaders are presented as ‘unelected aristocrats’, wherein they and their organisation enjoy ‘unearned privilege[s]’ and political power which is comparable with feudalism in its incongruity with ‘democracy and modernity’ (Coscia and Ravenhill 2024: 206-208).

Within this frame, three key sub-themes emerge: the RMT’s demands (especially regarding pay) are presented as relatively undeserved, or ‘greedy’; an interpretation of their grievances as illegitimate contributes to a broader anti-democratic thread, which is furthered by a presentation of RMT leaders (namely Mick Lynch) as wealthy, overpowerful ‘barons’ (Coscia and Ravenhill 2024: 206). In turn, this theme relates to a reliance on a ‘high politics’ discussion of the dispute, which allows personal criticisms against the RMT leadership to serve as representative of the union’s position, ‘obscuring ordinary workers’ agency’ in a democratically-mandated dispute (Myers 2024: 81).

2.1.1 RMT demands as ‘greedy’ or undeserved.

The RMT sought a pay-rise of approximately 7%, in the context of 11% inflation (Lee 2022), and within critical discussions of the strike this was presented as excessive or unjustified. Most explicitly, the *MailOnline* twice described the union as ‘greedy’ (Wright and Terry 2022a; Wright and Howard 2022), while *The Sun* deemed their demands ‘eye-watering’ (Ferguson and Reilly 2022). Piers Morgan (2022), incorrectly relaying the pay demands as an 11% rise, described the figure as ‘completely mad’. Such language serves to delegitimise the RMT’s argument that a pay-rise is necessary for their members, instead contributing to an interpretation of their demands as unreasonable, or ultimately unfeasible.

Further undermining the necessity of strike action was the frequent reproduction of false or misleading information regarding the pay of RMT members, which disseminated an impression that most members

were paid far above their actual salary. The *MailOnline* incorrectly reported their 'average' pay as £59,000 a year, which was subsequently debunked by BBC (2022b) fact-checkers (Milner 2022: 42). The average wage of train drivers—£54,000—was deliberately employed as indicative of the general pay of RMT members, despite train drivers not being involved in the dispute, and being largely represented by a separate union. The £54,000 figure was repeated multiple times by Morgan (2022), as evidence of RMT members making 'good money', contrasting this depiction of the RMT with an 'economic crisis when people are literally struggling to feed their kids', to the effect of delegitimising the union's claim that its members required a pay-rise and disassociating them from these 'struggling' people.

The use of 'lockdown' and the COVID-19 pandemic in framing the RMT as a 'threat' is discussed in chapter three. However, when discussing wages, the pandemic was also often invoked to undermine the RMT's demands, via references to the money put into the rail industry by the government, to support it through pandemic lockdowns. It was an argument put to Lynch by Morgan (2022), while *The Telegraph* and the *MailOnline* emphasised the 'taxpayer' as bearing the burden of 'spen[dng] more than £16bn' on the railways during the pandemic (Gill 2022b; Wright and Terry 2022a; Hookham 2022). Prefacing a discussion of the RMT's demands in this way serves to present their argument for a pay-rise *in spite of* the £16bn already given to the railways, which in the *MailOnline's* coverage furthered the framing of the RMT as 'greedy' or, implicitly, as ungrateful for this support (Wright and Terry 2022a). The railways are framed as an industry sustained through the pandemic via the public's taxes, furthered by an emphasis on decline in their use having created a 'desperate need to find savings' (Hookham 2022), wherein the union is demanding further public money beyond the worth of its industry.

The pandemic was also utilised when the media presented the union's pay demands as a comparative issue: railway workers' entitlement to a pay-rise is positioned relative to—and below—that of other public-sector key workers, most prominently health workers. In arguing that RMT members deserved a pay-rise less than health workers, Morgan (2022) stated: 'it's all comparative.' The RMT's rejection of a 3% pay-rise was often reported with reference to the offer as 'the same given last year to NHS staff who battled the Covid-19 crisis' (Robinson and Terry 2022; Wright and Terry 2022a; Churchill and

Ellicott 2022; Cole and Ferguson 2022). The RMT are discussed relative to other public sector workers who are presented as 'more deserving', and their demands are interpreted as a belief that they deserve pay-rises *more than* or *instead of* these workers. The rhetoric of this framing is demonstrated explicitly by the publication of a health worker's tweets about the strikes, expressing frustration that 'we are not allowed to strike. And my salary is totally worse than the ones that are striking' (Robinson 2022a; Sabin 2022). While the more centrist *Independent* published the post in its entirety, including a follow-up clarifying support for the rail strikes, the *MailOnline* reproduced the tweet in multiple articles without this clarification, to the effect of presenting a more critical commentary on the strikes.

This comparative frame was illustrated by Piers Morgan (2022), who directly asked Lynch:

> 'Why are we not giving nurses 11% pay rises…people who were really at the real front line of [the pandemic]…surely you would accept that health workers…should be first in the line?'

Pay demands are constructed here as a 'line' or queue, wherein only one sector can be addressed at a time. Railway workers are positioned behind health workers in this queue, by virtue of health workers' service on the 'real front line' of the pandemic, which is held as more worthy than the work of railway staff. Having constructed this queue, the RMT's demands are interpreted as upsetting its rightful order—government money is understood as a finite resource, of which they are demanding more than they deserve. The 'line' tool thus sustains a false dichotomy, which presents the RMT's pay demands as being made *at the expense of* 'more deserving' workers, especially at a time of economic crisis. A comparative framing has the effect of undermining the RMT's claim to a pay-rise, and by extension contributing to a theme of the union as 'greedy' for 'unearned privileges' (Coscia and Ravenhill 2024: 206).

2.1.2 RMT leaders as 'barons' with undue privileges.

RMT leaders were frequently described as 'union barons', whose power—in contrast to their reality as elected officials—amounted to a 'feudal privilege', thus 'symbolically disassociating trade unionism

with democracy and modernity' (Coscia and Ravenhill 2024: 206). The language of 'union barons' marks a continuity in critical rhetoric regarding trade unionism: Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher similarly criticised 'overmighty union barons', for their 'privileged immunities, and oligarchic government, strangling innovation by restrictive practices and overmanning' (Samuel 1992: 24). RMT leaders are recurrently referred to as 'union barons' by *The Sun* and the *MailOnline* (Cole and Ferguson 2022: Wright and Howard 2022)—the latter in one article headlined 'union baron Mick Lynch catches a cab after plunging Britain into chaos', which describes the cab as a 'luxury not likely to be afforded to the swathes of Brits desperately trying to get to work' (Robinson and Terry 2022). By virtue of the allegedly 'unearned privileges' his position enjoys, Lynch is separated from the conditions of ordinary 'Brits'.

Lynch's own salary was also frequently reported—for example by *The Independent* (O'Grady 2022b), and the *MailOnline,* who described him as a ''fat cat' who enjoys £125,000 in perks and pay' (Wright and Howard 2022). Piers Morgan (2022) discussed Lynch's salary in order to undermine the RMT's position, asking Lynch if there was not a 'slight inconsistency between saying there are too many rich people in the country…and you earning a shedload of cash?', going on to ask him, 'are you a millionaire, Mick?'

The theme of feudal privilege serves to separate the RMT—its representatives, and its cause—from ordinary people operating within a democracy. The union is presented as a collection of elites, described as a 'cabal' by *The Sun* (Ferguson and Reilly 2022), wielding undue power over the country via industrial action; the strikes were often described as 'Mick Lynch's strikes' (Wright and Terry 2022a; Wright 2022b). By equating unions leaders with unelected aristocrats, attributing the strikes to them delegitimises both the grievances and operation of the strikes, obscuring the ordinary members whose vote (by a huge margin) formed their democratic foundation (BBC 2022a), and placing the strikes at odds with traditional liberal democratic values (Coscia and Ravenhill 2024: 206).

2.1.3 High politics framings.

The presentation of union 'barons' was supported by a tendency to 'personif[y] the dispute' around a small number of 'named individuals' (Myers 2024: 81). Negative coverage of RMT leader Mick Lynch is extrapolated to represent the RMT position at large, while Network Rail executives, and Transport Secretary Grant Shapps, personify the other side of the dispute. This 'high politics' approach is another continuity from coverage of the 1984-85 miners' strike, as observed by Wade (1985: 276) and Myers (2024: 81). A concentration on the president of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), Arthur Scargill, acted as a vehicle for broader criticism of the NUM, especially given Scargill's unpopularity with the public and the press (Hollingsworth 1986: 272; Myers 2024: 81). Milner (2022: 430) and Boyle (2024: 3) note a similar media hostility towards Mick Lynch, given the RMT's confrontational reputation (Darlington 2009a: 5-7). *The Times* described him as 'acid-tongued', claiming the disruption caused by the strikes had rendered him a 'pariah' for many (Ledwith 2022b), and *The Telegraph* credited him as 'the mastermind of Britain's worst industrial strife for decades' (Andrews 2022).

Articles reporting Lynch's media appearances often described his conduct using hostile or negative verbs, which served to present the RMT more aggressively within the dispute. *The Telegraph* (2022a) described him as 'dismissive', while *The Sun* described him as having 'thundered', 'raged', 'smirked' and 'gloated' (Cole and Ferguson 2022). Reporting on Lynch's interview with Kay Burley for *Sky News Breakfast* (2022)—during which she accused Lynch of 'ridicul[ing her]'—the *MailOnline* said he 'mocked' the reporter and 'spat' his responses (Terry 2022). Piers Morgan (2022), when interviewing Lynch, presented his Facebook profile picture—of 'The Hood', the villain from 1960s television series *Thunderbirds*—asking 'where the comparison goes, because he was obviously an evil criminal terrorist mastermind', and observing that Lynch seemed 'very irritated' when he challenged the question's relevancy.

Myers (2024: 81) notes how the 'high politics' approach to covering the miners' strike gave the 'impression of a top-down struggle, obscuring ordinary workers' agency.' The 'personif[ication]' of the RMT dispute positions Mick Lynch as symbolic of the union, and thus personal criticisms of his character—presentations of him as a villainous 'union baron', or an aggressive interviewee—are the dominant filter through which the RMT's position is disseminated. The 'top-down' understanding of

the union, constructed by a feudal framing, is thus contributed to, and exacerbated by, 'top-down' coverage of the dispute, which distorts the union's democratic mandate and delegitimises the grievance of ordinary members.

2.2 Conclusion.

The feudal framing identified by Coscia and Ravenhill (2024) is demonstrated again within coverage of the RMT strikes, replete with the 'high politics' focus exercised by coverage of the miners' strike (Myers 2024: 80). The frame is employed through descriptions of the RMT as 'greedy', or via constructed comparisons between the RMT and other workers which serve to delegitimise their demands—as well as explicit descriptions of 'union barons', to whom the strikes are attributed, and who are in turn negatively presented within the dispute. This narrative frame of feudal privilege presents the RMT in opposition to the principles of modern British democracy, and thus as a destabilising influence—similar to the 'enemy within' constructed to frame the striking miners (Hart 2017: 26). Strike action is presented, like the system of feudal privilege used to define it, as outdated, and therefore a 'threat' to the country, which is outlined in the following chapter.

CHAPTER THREE. THE RMT AND THE PUBLIC: AN 'AGGRESSOR/VICTIM' BINARY.

3.1 Analysis.

Critical framings of the dispute, when contending with the two 'sides' involved in negotiations—Network Rail (and the Conservative government), and the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT)—frequently position the RMT as the dispute's 'aggressor', to blame for its lack of resolution (Boyle 2024: 15). Furthermore, the 'other side' of the dispute is cast not only as the employers, but as a constructed 'Britain' and its 'public', which are definitionally distinct from the striking workers, and the 'victim' of their actions.

This frame first involves the presentation of the RMT as the 'aggressor'. In opposition, a 'public' who are victimised by the RMT's strike action is then developed, while—as a notably contemporary narrative tool—a 'lockdown' theme, comparing the strikes to the COVID-19 pandemic as something *happening to,* or *being done to,* the public, contributes to an interpretation of the RMT as a 'threat' to Britain.

3.1.1 The RMT as the 'aggressor' of the dispute.

Within an 'aggressor/victim' binary, responsibility for the dispute was often placed solely on the RMT, rather than strike action being understood as the product of failed negotiations between the union and Network Rail. *The Sun* described Mick Lynch as 'gloat[ing]' over 'caus[ing] chaos for millions' (Cole and Ferguson 2022), and *The Telegraph* reported that 'rail unions have been accused of bringing the country to a standstill' (Gill 2022a); when interviewing Lynch, Piers Morgan (2022) explicitly identified the union leader as 'responsible for all the mayhem that's about to come our way.' The language of 'cause' and 'responsibility' serves to obscure the strikes as a two-sided industrial dispute, wherein both sides retain some agency to contribute to the dispute's resolution—instead, responsibility, and thus blame, is situated solely with the union.

Contributing to a framing of the RMT as an 'aggressor', explicitly aggressive or critical language is also employed to describe the union's position: the union is reported as 'wreaking havoc' (Morgan 2022), 'plunging Britain' into 'chaos' or 'paralysis' (Dollimore 2022), 'inflicting misery' (Ferguson and Reilly 2022), 'storming out of talks' (Wright and Terry 2022b) and 'wrecking the summer holiday plans of millions' (Robinson 2022b). Negative or aggressive verbs such as 'paralyse', 'inflict', 'storm' and 'wreck' are used to report the RMT's conduct, to the effect of presenting the union as a hostile or destructive force within and upon society—particularly when contrasted with the public as its 'victim'. *The Times* (2022a) advocates for modernisation of the railways in 'defiance' of 'the obstructionism of a militant trade union', thus problematising the RMT's position and identifying the union itself as 'obstructing' a resolution.

A use of hostile or violent language to frame the RMT as an 'aggressor' is linked to a modified version of the 'war framing' which Hart (2017: 14, 26) observes within coverage of the miners' strike, wherein the language of combat, as a 'semiotic resource', is utilised to frame the dispute as a 'war', in which the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) is presented as the 'enemy'. During the miners' strike, physical altercations between miners and police officers on picket lines supplied 'commonalities' with a combat setting, however the media's decision to cast the strikers as the 'enemy' within the conflict, and often to blame violence solely on the miners—and utilise it to condemn the NUM's political position (Waddington 2017: 119)—is demonstrative of a deliberate 'element of rhetoric' (Hart 2017: 26).

The RMT strikes saw no such picket-line violence, and thus supplied no 'commonalities' which might lend themselves to a war framing. Yet such a framing is still observed within coverage, to a comparatively limited degree. *The Sun* described the RMT as a '40,000-strong army' that had 'declared war on Britain' (Ferguson and Reilly 2022), while the metaphor of a 'war' or 'battle' is also utilised by *The Times* (Gill 2022b), *The Telegraph* (Swinford et al. 2022b), and the *MailOnline* (Wright and Howard). Tranmer (2022: n.p.) notes that one characteristic of a war framing is that it excludes the possibility of *compromise*—an understanding of the dispute as a 'war' frames it as a zero-sum interaction, wherein either the union or their employers are necessarily 'defeated'. In turn, this critical

framing works in conjunction with other linguistic tools to position the RMT as the 'enemy' of this conflict who, similarly to the NUM, must be defeated.

Despite a lack of picket-line violence, allusions to the possibility of physical aggression on the RMT's part were still employed by Kay Burley (2022), during her interview with Mick Lynch for *Sky News Breakfast.* She repeatedly questioned Lynch on what RMT members on the picket line would 'do' about agency workers (brought in by the government) attempting to cross it, asking whether they would 'allow' them to cross, or try to 'stop' them (Burley 2022). Lynch (in Burley 2022) responded that RMT members would 'ask [agency workers not to go to work]', to which Burley insisted he had not answered the question 'to [her] satisfaction', and when pressed as to what she believed picketing 'involv[ed]', Burley mentioned the 'picket lines of the nineteen-eighties', alluding to instances of physical intimidation against strike-breakers. Despite lacking the 'commonalities' of physical violence that lent the semiotics of war to coverage of the miners' strike, Burley's line of questioning sought to imply the possibility of such violence from the RMT, to the effect of establishing a hypothetical association between the RMT and the kind of picket-line violence which was used to condemn the miners' strike (Montgomery 2025: 536).

3.1.2 The 'public' as victims of the RMT.

Opposite the RMT within an 'aggressor/victim' binary, it was often not the employers, but the public—as a blameless party—who were positioned as the union's 'victim.' Central here was the media's tendency to construct a 'public', or a 'Britain', which was mutually exclusive from the RMT and its members, enabling it to more effectively position the RMT's strike action as something 'happening' to the public. A mutually-exclusive understanding of the public and the RMT is demonstrated in an article from *The Sun* headlined 'Smirkers v Workers' (Ferguson and Reilly 2022), and a *MailOnline* article reporting that 'workers blasted 50,000 RMT members' (Wright and Terry 2022a). Both articles deliberately construct the ordinary 'worker' as a separate entity to RMT members, who is then positioned *in opposition* to them.

A similar construct was often used to discuss the strikes as something the union was *doing to* a 'Britain' which is understood as separate from the RMT; union representatives are accused of 'plotting to bring Britain to its knees' (Parry 2022; Price 2022), or 'declar[ing] war on Britain' (Ferguson and Reilly 2022). Interviewing Mick Lynch, Piers Morgan (2022) listed hardships faced by the country, including the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the 'fractured mayhem of Brexit', to argue that 'just when…people can start to feel hopeful and positive about life, along come you [the RMT]…and you're gonna cause complete chaos and mayhem for the British public.' Morgan's interpretation of the dispute distinguishes the RMT from the British 'people', and instead aligns the union with adversities facing the country; the union is presented as a negative force acting *upon* and *against* Britain, similarly to a conceptualisation of the NUM as an 'enemy within' (Myers 2024: 77-78). This rhetorical dissociation of the RMT from the nation works to 'other' the union (Brons 2015: 70), against the 'collective action frame' argued by Lynch (Boyle 2024: 2), wherein he positions the RMT and the public as 'relational objects' against the common antagonists of 'employers and the government.'

An interpretation of the dispute wherein the union 'victimise' the public is furthered by an emphasis on the disruption caused by strike action, particularly in conjunction with a presentation of the RMT as solely responsible for the dispute. Coverage of disruption caused by the strikes often focused on the most vulnerable or affected groups, such as students travelling to exams, or hospital patients: *The Telegraph* describe a 'safety net of a functioning train network…withdrawn by the RMT' (Bodkin et al. 2022). Both Kay Burley (2022), and Richard Madeley and Ranvir Singh for *Good Morning Britain* (2022), put it to Mick Lynch that patients could 'die as a result of these strikes' or that 'this strike is going to cost lives, people with cancer are going to die', to the effect of presenting these possibilities as a direct result of the RMT's actions, which it is reasonable that the union answers for. Furthermore, the language of 'holding the country to ransom', discussed by Samuel (1992: 24) in relation to Margaret Thatcher's rhetoric towards trade unions, was repeatedly observed (Swinford et al. 2022b; Groves, Churchill and Jehring 2022; Wright and Terry 2022b; Morgan 2022), as was that of the union 'punishing' the public (Robinson and Terry 2022). Such linguistic devices serve to position the union aggressively in relation to the public (Zienkowski and De Cleen 2021: 528), who in turn were described

by the *MailOnline* as 'defiant' of a tyrannical union, or 'resilient', for travelling despite the strikes (McLaughlin et al. 2022).

3.1.3 The strikes in a 'pandemic' framing.

As seen within Piers Morgan's (2022) interview, the RMT was often aligned—and thus equated—with issues facing Britain, such as war in Europe, economic problems, or, most often, the COVID-19 pandemic and consequent lockdowns (Morgan 2022; Andrews 2022), as a 'threat' to the country which enjoys prominence within the public consciousness, owing to its recency. Utilisation of the semiotics of the pandemic is—inevitably—a particularly new linguistic device, however it can arguably be understood as a more contemporary iteration of a 'threat' framing which, in previous disputes such as the miners' strike, was exercised via alignment and comparison between the strikes and the 'threat' of international wars, such as the World Wars or (particularly during the miners' strike) the 1983 Falklands war (Hart 2017: 13, 26; Myers 2024: 80-81). A reduction in travel and high-street footfall owing to the strikes was often compared to, or conflated with, a 'lockdown' or a 'return [to] 'the darkest days of Covid'' (Robinson 2022a; 2022b), which the union was in some articles explicitly blamed for: 'Lynch has plunged Britain into 'another lockdown'' (Terry 2022).

The RMT is thus presented as equivalent to the pandemic, as an 'external threat' faced by the entire country. Myers (2024: 80-81) notes that equivalences drawn between the Falklands war and the threat of the miners' strike had the effect of 'producing a similar threat response, legitimising government action' against the strike, while the unprecedented nature of the pandemic serves to emphasise the extent of the rail strikes' disruption, via the association drawn by the media between the two. This framing thus contributes to a disassociation of the RMT's members with an ordinary British 'public', reinforcing the mutual exclusivity of an 'aggressor/victim' binary which depicts the union as seeking to '[bring] Britain to its knees' (Price 2022). Trade unionism is presented as 'contrasting…the interests of workers, employers and service users', via a deliberate rhetorical positioning of strike action as a hostility external to 'civil society' (Coscia and Ravenhill 2024: 203).

3.2 Conclusions.

An ‘aggressor/victim’ binary constructed rhetorical understandings of the actors involved in the dispute, which had the significant (yet often implicit) effect of presenting the RMT and its members as not only definitionally separate from ‘Britain’ and its ‘public’, but also fundamentally *oppositional* to the ‘interests’ of this constructed nation (Coscia and Ravenhill 2024: 203). This mutual exclusivity then allowed the ‘aggressor’ and ‘victim’ roles of these actors to be more effectively employed; responsibility for the strikes’ disruption could be wholly attributed to a hostile RMT—obscuring the dispute’s reality as a two-sided negotiation—while the public suffered the ‘threat’ of strike action, which was aligned with significant external threats to the country, including the COVID-19 pandemic. The distinct *nature* of this threat—as one capable of taking Britain ‘back’ to an era of militant, politically-radical trade unionism—is discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR. RMT MILITANCY AND STRIKE ACTION AS REGRESSIVE.

4.1 Analysis.

The final distinct framing employed in critical coverage of the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers' (RMT) strike action serves to emphasise, or exaggerate, the union's militancy and left-wing political radicalism (Darlington 2009a: 6; Boyle 2024: 2), particularly as negative characteristics, which render the union archaic, or out-of-step with a modern British society under a Conservative government (Myers 2024: 77-79).

Within this framing, the 'threat' posed by the RMT's 'preference' for strike action—a threat constructed by the aforementioned 'aggressor/victim' framing—is distinctly 'hard-left' in nature, wherein left-wing politics are presented as a destabilising influence within the country (Myers 2024: 80). The RMT is presented, furthermore, as regressive threat, via a theme of drawing associative comparisons to the powerfully-militant trade unionism of the 1970s and 1980s—an era which the RMT's strike action could allegedly 'drag' Britain 'back' to (Wright and Howard 2022).

4.1.1 The RMT as a militant union.

The RMT is recognised as a relatively 'militant' union within contemporary trade unionism (Darlington 2009a: 5). Accordingly, much of the coverage surrounding the strikes emphasised this—excluding *The Independent,* all of the newspapers sampled described the RMT as 'militant' (Andrews 2022; Ledwith 2022a; Sales 2022; Robinson 2022a). The union was also repeatedly described as 'hardline' (Ferguson and Reilly 2022; Wright 2022a; Wright and Terry 2022b), and RMT leader Mick Lynch as a 'firebrand' (Terry 2022; The Telegraph 2022a; Price 2022).

Description of the RMT as 'militant' is not a critical framing in itself. However, repeated emphasis on the union's militancy does contribute to a presentation of the RMT as 'strike-prone', as observed regarding the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) during the 1984-85 miners' strike (Wade 1985:

273); the legitimacy of the grievances motivating industrial action are undermined by an implication that unions simply *want* to strike, regardless of circumstance. Furthermore, that only the newspaper generally considered 'centrist' within the sample (YouGov 2017) did not describe the RMT as 'militant' suggests a critical *use* of such language by other media outlets, wherein they report from the 'belief that strikes [are] wrong' (Wade 1985: 273). The critical presentations of strike action outlined in previous chapters—as a 'threat to the public, and 'inimical' to their 'interests' (Coscia and Ravenhill 2024: 203)—work in conjunction with an emphasis on the confrontational tendencies of the RMT, to present union 'militancy' as a negative characteristic; when striking is portrayed as a negative action, the implication of a union's *preference* for strike action no longer operates as a neutral observation.

4.1.2 The RMT as politically radical and left-wing.

The RMT's left-wing politics were similarly highlighted within coverage of the dispute, regardless of their relevance. Instances ranged from a tendency to refer to the RMT as 'left-wing' or a 'hard-left' union (Dollimore 2022; Churchill and Ellicott 2022; Ferguson and Reilly 2022; Hookham 2022), to explicit associations of the union, or Mick Lynch, with Marxism or socialism (O'Grady 2022a), as exemplified by the *MailOnline's* description of Lynch as a 'socialist firebrand' (Wright and Terry 2022b). Indeed, Lynch's personal politics received significant scrutiny, with *The Independent* claiming that 'politically, Lynch isn't as "moderate" or reasonable as he sounds' (O'Grady 2022b). The weight lent to Lynch's politics relates to the aforementioned 'high politics' frame, wherein his views are extrapolated, and reported as though representative of the RMT's politics at large. An example of this which received considerable attention was Richard Madeley and Ranvir Singh's (2022) interview with Lynch for *Good Morning Britain:* the very first question asked by Madeley was, 'are you, or are you not a Marxist? Because if you are a Marxist, then you're into revolution, and into bringing down capitalism, so are you or aren't you?', continuing, after Lynch stated that he was not, 'to be absolutely clear, you are not a Marxist.'

Madeley (2022) stressed that he was not personally 'accusing' Lynch of being a Marxist. Yet by reproducing, and utilising, the allegations made by others, the possibility that Lynch is a Marxist (and thus, by Madeley's definition, 'into revolution' and 'bringing down capitalism') is presented as somewhat 'reasonable'. Interviewers' choice of which questions to ask has the effect of legitimising the claims made within these questions, at least as far as presenting these claims as warranting acknowledgement and response from the interviewee; there is, in this way, an element of construction in which arguments the interviewer chooses to 'privilege'. Here, Madeley (2022) 'privileges' a presentation of Lynch as a Marxist. The character of the 'threat' posed by strike action is presented, via such themes, as radically left-wing, which—through negative presentations of left-wing politics—thus renders it incongruous with the liberal, capitalist values of the status quo (Coscia and Ravenhill 2024: 203), aligning the RMT's agenda with 'class war' (Wright and Howard 2022) or 'revolution' (Madeley and Singh 2022).

Trade unionism is a fundamentally left-wing political force. The emphasis of these politics is a traditional theme of coverage, observed during both the 1984-85 miners' strike, and the RMT strikes—particularly as two notably politicised unions (Buckley 2015: 420; Darlington 2009a: 5-7), striking under right-wing Conservative governments taking a hard 'anti-union line' (Milner 2022: 43; Samuel 1992: 24). The NUM was presented as a 'bad' socialist threat, to 'good' democratic values which were aligned with the government's right-wing politics (Myers 2024: 77-79); it was associated with other controversial political organisations deemed part of a 'fascist Left' (Hollingsworth 1986: 268), such as the IRA or Argentina, to the effect of 'politicis[ing] and stigmatising' strikers, and 'prepar[ing] the public to conflate strike action with other hostile groups, promoting a moral panic' (Myers 2024: 77-80). Similarly, a Conservative MP's accusation that the RMT were, by striking, acting as 'Putin's friends' was reported by the media (Robinson, Wright and Terry 2022). Left-wing politics is disassociated with democracy, and aligned with external 'threats' to Britain—similarly to the union's 'militancy', an emphasis on the RMT's left-wing values is employed as a union-critical frame via the negative connotations attached to the media's construction of the 'left' as destabilising, aggressive and outdated.

4.1.3 Strike action as outdated, or a return to the 1970s/1980s.

Similarities were often drawn between the RMT's 'confrontational' type of trade unionism, and the labour politics of a 'past' Britain, referring to the political power wielded by unions in the 1970s and 1980s. This era is invoked as an undesirable political landscape which the RMT's strike action threatens to take Britain *back to,* in contrast with a more 'modern', co-operative trade unionism (Gallas 2018: 240-241; Myers 2024: 82). The aforementioned 'feudal' framing is again relevant here: the undue influence it depicts unions enjoying over the country is presented as archaic, both in its resemblance to medieval feudalism, and as reminiscent of 1970s/1980s trade unionism (framed as the height of 'feudal' unionism) as an era the country has *progressed* from. Through this frame, the presentation of the RMT as 'militant' or 'hard-left' becomes particularly critical—these attributes are used to align the RMT with a 'type' of 1970s/1980s trade unionism which, in turn, is presented as 'undesirable'.

As such, the RMT, as a 'militant' union, is framed as a 'regressive' force within modern Britain, in its alleged aim to 'return' the country to a political landscape comparable with the 1970s/80s. Comparisons between the RMT's dispute, and the trade unionism of this era, appeared frequently across the media: *The Independent* described the dispute as like 'being in a time machine' back to this period, warning that Britain was 'going back to older habits, and ones that served us ill', wherein the 'far right and the revolutionary socialists fed on the division and decay…it's all happening again. It's hard to stomach' (O'Grady 2022a). *The Sun* reported the strike action as 'fuelling fears the nation is heading for 1970s'-style industrial unrest' (Ferguson and Reilly 2022), while NUM leader Arthur Scargill's appearance on an RMT picket line prompted the *MailOnline* headline, 'we really ARE back in the 1980s', in the sense that Lynch threatened to 'drag Britain kicking and screaming back to the economic unrest of the 1970s and early 1980s' (Wright and Howard 2022). That these comparisons are inherently negative is established through language that describes such a return as 'fear[ed]' or 'hard to stomach'. The RMT is aligned with 'unrest', and 'nostalgia' for an era where 'militant union barons could topple governments' (Hookham 2022). Kay Burley (2022), interviewing Lynch, put to him an accusation made by a Labour politician that the RMT are 'taking us back to the 1970s', citing talk of 'coordinating strike

action' as evidence of this. The union's grievances are thus dissociated from the contemporary political context which has produced them, undermining the role played by modern political governance in causing the dispute (Milner 2022: 42; Boyle 2024: 7; Zienkowski and De Cleen 2021: 525).

There were not only continuities in media coverage between the 1984/85 miners' strike, and the 2022 RMT strikes, but within this narrative frame, the miners' strike itself was often employed as its own semiotic resource with which to discuss the rail strikes. In alluding to the possibility of picket-line violence from the RMT, Kay Burley (2022), interviewing Lynch for *Sky News Breakfast,* recalled physical altercations on the picket-lines of the 1980s, and (when prompted by Lynch) clarified the 'miners' strike' as her reference (Montgomery 2025: 536)—to which Lynch turned to observe the 'peaceful' picket-line behind him and asked, 'well, does it look like the miners' strike?' Here, the 'miners' strike' is given connotations of violence and aggression, which Burley (2022) then employs within the context of the RMT strikes to construct a framing which aligns the two disputes, despite a lack of any similar physical conflict during the RMT's dispute (Montgomery 2025: 536-537). The media also drew comparisons between Scargill and Lynch, with the latter described as being 'inspired by Thatcher's arch-nemesis Arthur Scargill' (Wright 2022a; Middleton 2022), and the *MailOnline* claiming that 'Scargill's revolutionary socialism now lives on in his ideological successor Lynch' (Wright and Howard 2022), constructing a direct continuity between the miners' strike and the RMT.

The invocation of the miners' strike as a discursive tool indicates its continued relevancy within Britain's collective consciousness, albeit as a symbol subjected to conflicting interpretations: the miners serve both as what Nettleingham (2017: 851) describes as a 'canonical generation' for organised labour, and simultaneously as an 'infamous' case of industrial action which, for critics, contemporary action can be positioned as being *as bad as.* A lack of similarities between the miners' strike and the rail strikes—the absence of picket-line conflicts, and the RMT's conduction of a national ballot on strike action (the NUM's lack of which was fixated upon to delegitimise the strike (Myers 2024: 79-80))—did not prevent its use as a comparative rhetorical tool with which the RMT could be critically aligned. It was utilised as an undesirable event in recent British history, to which the RMT's approach to trade unionism was reminiscent of. In this way, critical media coverage sought to frame the RMT, owing its

militancy and politicisation, as a threat which would see Britain 'regress' to a prior era of trade unionism.

4.2 Conclusion.

A common narrative frame utilised in coverage of the RMT strikes sought to align the union—owing to its 'confrontational' and politicised approach—with an era of trade unionism which was presented as archaic, and therefore undesirable. Discussions of the union's 'militancy' or left-wing platform were coloured by the media's production of consciously negative understandings of these attributes, as incompatible with the 'good', modern values of liberal capitalism (Myers 2024: 77-79). The trade unionism of the 1970s/80s—and particularly the 1984/85 miners' strike—was employed as a discursive tool by which to interpret the RMT's agenda. Negative connotations were attached to this era, and then by extension applied to the RMT, consequently disassociating the union from the modern conditions which informed the dispute, in order to frame it as a radical threat to the 'progress' made by Britain since the 1970s/80s.

CONCLUSION.

The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers' (RMT) strike action in 2022 became part of a 'summer of discontent' which saw widespread strikes, including within those public sectors which were utilised by the media as a comparative tool against rail workers, based on the perceived value of their work (research into how coverage of these strikes differed *between* sectors would therefore constitute a valuable addition to the literature). Within coverage of these rail strikes, three dominant critical narrative frames emerged; they proved more prevalent in outlets which leaned further to the right, and reflected both continuities and changes in the way mainstream media constructs understandings of trade unionism.

A 'feudal framing' continued to be used, contributing here to an understanding of the RMT as wielding undue power, and making illegitimate demands—especially in comparison to other workers—despite the democratic nature of the strike action (Coscia and Ravenhill 2024: 204-206). Similarly to a framing of the RMT's strike action as 'regressive', or reminiscent of previous eras of trade unionism, this narrative presented the union as an archaic political force, whose platform was incompatible with the liberal, capitalist values which were, in turn, presented as intrinsic to a desirable, 'modern' Britain. This perceived contradiction was emphasised within a narrative positioning the RMT as the external 'aggressor' of an innocent 'Britain'. Coverage treated the British public and the RMT as mutually-exclusive actors, rather than discussing the dispute as a conflict *within* and *between* elements of British society, and aligned the RMT with external 'threats'—most notably the COVID-19 pandemic.

The themes identified demonstrated multiple similarities to those employed within coverage of the 1984-85 miners' strike, despite key differences between the disputes—such as a lack of picket-line violence during the RMT strikes, and their conduction of a national balloting of their members on the decision to strike. The 'war framing' used during the miners' strike (Hart 2017: 14, 26) was used again, albeit to a lesser extent, to discuss the RMT's dispute—as was a 'high politics' focus, and a critical fixation on the union's left-wing politics. The presence of similarities within media coverage of the two

disputes does suggest that the specific context of an instance of strike action exerts limited influence on media narratives constructed around it, especially in comparison with pre-conceived constructs and mythologies regarding trade unionism, which the media frequently invoked.

Furthermore, the study frequently observed how the miners' strike itself has become a semiotic resource with which the rail strikes were framed, wherein rhetorical associations between the two disputes allowed negative presentations of the miners' strike to be projected onto the rail strikes. Such results appear to reflect the sustained legacy of the miners' strike as asserted by Nettleingham (2017), within both critical media discourses and the history of trade unionism. More generally, the study's findings complement many of the observations made regarding mainstream media's treatment of trade unionism by prior research (Coscia and Ravenhill 2024; Milner 2022; Gallas 2018; Hart 2017), while also identifying other distinctly new themes, such as utilisation of the pandemic, and the language of 'lockdown'.

Research that seeks to build upon these findings might examine how these narratives as the strikes continued. The rail strikes, like the miners' strike, were a particularly protracted industrial dispute, and while the RMT considerable public support during the initial strikes (Folan 2022), some polling does indicate this declined during later action (YouGov 2022). One might expect to see any such decline integrated into critical media coverage, and that the key frames employed would change and respond over time to developments within the dispute; a particular point of controversy came after a period of negotiation in November 2022 broke down into strike action again in December, when the RMT staged last-minute strikes around Christmas.

Broadly, these findings indicate the significance of constructed mythologies and interpretations of historical trade unionism in informing mainstream media's understandings (particularly on the right) of the contemporary labour movement. Criticisms of the RMT sought to delegitimise its strike action, and three central delegitimising frames were employed, to the effect of presenting it as variously unjustified, outdated, and destabilising for a modern liberal democracy. Use of these frames—which often constituted the most 'viral' pieces as coverage, as with the interviews examined here—was not without

its own criticisms (Livingston 2022). Yet the attention they received ensured these narratives featured centrally within those discourses which will come to define the rail strikes' own 'mythology.'

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