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IS THE PRESS ANTI-LABOR? Or Just Out of Touch...

□ Michael Hoyt

At 12:01 a.m., November 1, All Saints' Day 1983, the Chrysler Corporation's stamping plant in Twinsburg, Ohio, suddenly fell silent. Members of United Auto Workers Local 122 shut down their machines for a strike. As the door panels, floor pans, and other parts they produce stopped flowing across the country from Twinsburg, the only source of supply for these parts, half a dozen Chrysler assembly plants fell silent too.

In New York that night, on *NBC Nightly News*, Tom Brokaw called it a "wildcat strike"—an unauthorized walkout. On the other coast, a *Los Angeles Times* editor changed the first paragraphs of the Detroit bureau's story, making it "Robert Weissman's strike," a walkout "almost singlehandedly" engineered by Weissman, the president of the Twinsburg local union. The alterations made the story conform more closely with other coverage around the country, which implied that a pack of militants in Twinsburg was knocking Chrysler down just as the company was getting up off its knees.

That was Chrysler's line on the strike, but it was just one way of looking at it. Weissman, a man who does not "regard the title of militant as a smear," has few fans among the top leaders of the UAW. But authorization for his local's strike had been carefully cleared through the union's regional director, its Chrysler director, and its new president, Owen Bieber, following fifteen fruitless months of local bargaining. As often happens in labor stories, a lot of good questions went unasked in Twinsburg.

For example, what was the strike about?

Oil is one answer: it dripped from the machines, according to UAW spokesman David Mitchell, and was all over the floor—not a good idea around stamping machines. In the end Chrysler agreed to add

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a dozen janitors to clean it up.

Forced overtime is another: Marc Stepp, director of the UAW's Chrysler department, had been urging Chrysler to reopen a shut-down stamping plant in Detroit instead of working the Twinsburg workers seven days a week, some of them for many months. But Chrysler said no, leaving itself a tired and angry work force—and just one source of supply for vital car parts.

From Weissman's little-reported point of view, Chrysler was on the warpath, trying to follow Ford and General Motors down the road to cheaper local contracts, starting with Twinsburg. "This was a defensive strike," he says. "There was no pioneering." He thinks Chrysler misread the UAW's resolve, a \$50 to \$90 million mistake.

Biased or Boring?

John Holusha touched on some of these subjects in his story in *The New York Times* of November 5, 1983. They are angles any good writer might pursue in a labor story. But good labor journalists are an endangered species. The strike in Twinsburg, at least, was covered; a lot of good labor stories are simply ignored. A rich harvest goes to waste.

Why? "I would not suggest for a minute that there is some conscious bias," says A.H. Raskin, who for years was the dean of labor reporters from his desk at *The New York Times*. "It's just that labor is a much less significant element in terms of shaping policy or even innovating in terms of its own problems. People are bored with the trade union movement."

This definition of the beat makes Raskin's successor, William Serrin, uncomfortable. "So many labor stories are just vitally important to American life," Serrin says. "Workers had problems in the past and they have problems now. Covering labor is not writing about Lane Kirkland; it's writing about a hundred million people in the work force. How can a hundred million people be boring?"

How, indeed, particularly when anyone with half an antenna senses the close of a long, comfortably dull chapter in American work-life? Global banking and world trade, robots and computers, a shift in corporate strategy or a higher profit goal, the falling price of copper or the rising dollar abroad—forces outside of workers' control suddenly loom larger in their lives. There is a feeling of a shift in the balance of power, a serious weakening of workers' only collective voice, the unions. Who knows what's slouching our way? Whatever it is, it's not dull.

Labor reporting is not uniformly bad. Much of the better stuff is to be found in some of the country's most upscale publications, such as *Business Week*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, and, on the air, in segments of *The*

MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour and National Public Radio. There is some good labor writing, too, in places like Detroit and Chicago, Omaha and Kansas City. Still, it is hard to find a kind word about most labor journalism from anyone these days. "Reporters don't understand the language, texture, or history of labor relations. They just don't seem to know what to ask," comments Larry Rubin, who has answered "off-the-mark" questions from journalists for three different unions, most recently the Machinists, over the past fifteen years.

Among the harshest critics of labor journalism are its practitioners: "Today, the labor writer is a tired guy without much history or background, who doesn't go to the factories," says a labor writer from one of the country's top newspapers, who requested anonymity. "It's not a beat with much prestige," adds Mike McGraw, a labor reporter for *The Des Moines Register* and labor editor of *The Kansas City Star* before becoming a bureau chief at the *Star*. "General-circulation papers just don't cover it very well."

While business coverage is on the rise, labor journalism is declining in quantity and quality. "It has been declining for a long time, probably since the 1950s," says John Hoerr, an associate editor at *Business Week* who specializes in labor. The *San Francisco Chronicle*, which in the 1940s had two labor writers,



has no one with that title now, though management says labor issues are handled by its three-person economics team. *The Kansas City Times* recently combined its labor beat with transportation. *The New York Times*, according to Raskin, has far fewer reporters available with expertise in labor than it did in years past. And "many papers just stopped covering organized labor," Raskin says.

The Greyhound Strike

Even in stories that received a great deal of attention, like the Greyhound strike, we are getting coverage with holes big enough for a bus to turn around in.

What is the Greyhound Corporation, for example? Many stories gave no clue that it is not just a bus company, that it began to diversify some fifteen years ago into fields ranging from soap manufacturing to Burger King hamburgers, and that its bus-manufacturing division still sells buses to some of Greyhound Line's competitors.

Who is John W. Teets, who took the wheel at Greyhound two years ago? What does he do to earn his \$425,000 salary, plus bonuses, director's fees, etc.?

What is the history and makeup of the Amalgamated Transit Union, which represents the bus line's drivers, ticket sellers, mechanics, maintenance workers, and baggage handlers? So badly beaten, why did it seem so poorly prepared?

Even the heart of the story, the bargaining issues, was not always handled well. *The Chicago Tribune*, on November 2, got the story exactly backwards, saying the bus line's employees would strike "unless a demand for higher wages is met by the carrier." Most publications focused on Greyhound's original demand for a 9.5% wage cut, although the company was also demanding major concessions in benefits and work rules. "A lot of coverage overstated the company's plight, understated what the company wanted from the workers, and completely missed the part-time workers issue [the company wanted to hire part-time employees with reduced benefits], which is a big, big deal," comments Bob Arnold, the labor editor for *Business Week*.

Virtually all of the broadcast and print stories noted that profits at the bus line were flat recently; many noted the reasons: the recession's effect on bus ridership, competition from the newly deregulated airlines, and a fare war with Trailways. Few went farther to point out that two of these problems—recession and fare wars—were probably temporary, or that Greyhound had enthusiastically supported bus-line deregulation, which may increase its profits in the long run.

The union did not make balanced coverage easy. At one point, for for instance, the union declared a news blackout after Greyhound had



plastered the country with full-page newspaper ads. Reporters with the time and talent talked to local union leaders, who sometimes have as much information as the top leaders, and may be more willing to share it.

There are independent sources, too, with information that can add dimension, making reporting more than merely pitting two sides against each other, and enabling the reporter to challenge what he's told. "I find," says Henry Weinstein of the *Los Angeles Times*, "that to do this job best it's necessary to give yourself a crash course in the economics of various industries, to talk to Wall Street analysts, academics, and so forth." This kind of reporting illuminates forces behind the struggles at the bargaining tables, from imports to deregulation to the cost of money. "If a company is in trouble, for example, its interest rate [for loans] go up," says Ray Rogers, whose Corporate Campaign, Inc. describes itself as a pro-labor consulting firm. "So the workers get less and the bankers get more. It doesn't make much sense, but nobody writes much about it."

The Big, Missed Eastern Story

Nobody writes much about the strategies behind company and union struggles either, although they are the stuff of fascinating stories. The December agreement between Eastern Air Lines, Inc.,

and three of its major unions, for example, was hailed in many quarters as a model of union and management cooperation. That this cooperation came about only after more than two years of battle was less frequently reported.

Since the fall of 1981, Eastern president Frank Borman had used his ex-astronaut image and a steady peppering of bankruptcy threats, videotaped messages to the work place, and letters to workers' homes to convince employees that sacrifice on his terms was Eastern's only hope of staying in business. Meanwhile, District 100 of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers had hired analysts to look into Eastern finances and break down Borman's figures. Union leaders employed what they called "psychological jujitsu." Instead of rigidly resisting Borman's plans, they offered "positive alternatives" of their own, keeping a well-informed membership in on the action. (The press might have got a hint of this two years ago when workers, including mechanics still in their work clothes, lined up for microphones at the company's annual meeting in 1982 to question Borman)

It was not always Borman that the union faced. Some of its negotiations were with Eastern's creditors, who were threatening to refuse to roll over the airline's loans unless the workers were willing to make concessions. The union's research, however, led it to question the role of the creditors, particularly Citibank and Chase Manhattan. These banks had put together loan packages to enable troubled Boeing Co., Inc., to build new jet liners and Eastern to buy them. The union contended that Eastern was using money from previous labor concessions to buy more jets than it needed or could afford, mainly for the benefit of the banks.

The bargaining at Eastern "was one of the greatest stories, with color and excitement, and the press didn't cover it until after the fact," says Andrew Banks, assistant director for the Center for Labor Research and Studies at Florida International University, and an adviser to District 100 of the Machinists union. "The union was asking, 'Why is Eastern buying all these airplanes?' It looked at *why* the company was in bad shape, not just that it was in bad shape, and determined that the way to fix this is to alter the way the company does business. This doesn't happen every day in the labor movement. It was beyond the parameters of a lot of reporters."



Though reporters missed the significant pre-contract maneuvering at Eastern, most publications did recognize that the final agreement between the airline and its unions was extraordinary. *Time* magazine, however, seemed to miss the point. In a December 19 story called "Labor Gets a Working Over," *Time* called the agreement "another setback" for labor, emphasizing that workers were making broad concessions and getting some Eastern stock in return. Left out of *Time's* account was the fact that workers gained a 25% share of the company, in common and preferred stock; and that, in return for the temporary pay concessions, the unions gained permanent access to Eastern's books, a say in formulation of business plans before they get to the board of directors, and the right to appeal plans the unions consider unwise. Workers can also now appoint four members of the company's twenty-one-member board.

Rather than make the Eastern agreement just another paragraph in its story, *Time* might have compared Eastern's agreement to other recent contracts, such as in steel, where workers got next to nothing in return for major concessions and unionists who opposed the give-backs had few strategies beyond defiance.

How to Bring Some Life to a Dead Beat

Covering unions, of course, is near the center of anyone's definition of the labor beat. What happens to union workers—what they win or lose—often sets the tone for the rest of the work force. Simply covering strikes and major contracts, however, does not do the job. Trends and themes in organized labor, though more difficult and time-consuming to report, are often as interesting as they are important. Some samples:

- A few unions have been successful in organizing new members, but most have had trouble, and either way they are up against more opposition these days. At a St. Louis insurance company, clerical workers arrived at the office to find "Vote No" T-shirts on each of their desks and on the back of supervisors. Organizing drives can involve hardfought psychological battles.
- The enormous influx of women into the work force, and onto the rolls of unions, offers any number of stories. Are contracts adapting to this influx with provisions for maternity and paternity leaves, equal pay for equal work, and child care? Are women becoming union leaders? What of the computer and its effect on the vast number of women who are clerical workers? Have unions offered any protection from computer pacing of work, from computer-related health and safety problems?
- There is much, too, to be written about corruption in unions, and about unions that fail to protect their members. And "Nobody's writing much about the disarray inside of unions, the bureaucratic

deep sleep," observes Audrey Freedman of The Conference Board, a corporation-oriented think tank.

There is no real shortage of stories about the decline of union membership, power, and prestige. But rarely, if ever, do these stories go on to explore what that decline means for ordinary people in terms of their standard of living and their voice on the job. Another unasked question is: If union power is declining, what is taking its place?

Coverage of unions is too much restricted to contracts and strikes, and too restricted to a handful of major unions—Autoworkers, Teamsters, and a few others. At the same time, by being artificially restricted to unions, the labor beat excludes nonunion workplaces where four out of five Americans work. Work is a universal subject, and there are many ways to write about it.

The Wall Street Journal sent reporter Mary Williams to learn what it's like to be a bank teller last December, just as a few years earlier it had sent Beth Nissen to an assembly line at Texas Instruments to explore that company's labor policies. Last June, the *Journal's* George Getschow found laid-off northern industrial workers in a state of near slavery in work camps in the South.

William Serrin's November 1979 *New York Times* story on the first woman coal miner to die in a mine was a poignant description of a sad milestone for a changing work force. Mike McGraw says that when he covered labor in Des Moines and Kansas City, he used to get many of his union and nonunion labor stories by regularly checking the records of hearings for unemployment benefits. A worker's claim that he quit because a power-plant construction job was unsafe led McGraw to don a hardhat and take a look, which led to an exposé.

Economic issues like plant closings, productivity, foreign competition, and wage-and-benefit concessions (which are being imposed on nonunion as well as union workers) are of interest to all workers. Another such issue is workplace safety and health. Reporting on toxic chemicals, for example, has increased, but, comments Anthony Mazzocchi, former vice-president of the Oil, Chemical, and Atomic Workers Union, "the missing link is that these toxics emanate from someplace. People make that stuff." Some 17,000 people die of cancer each year as the result of on-the-job exposure to hazardous chemicals, according to one estimate, and they die with and without union cards.

Why Labor is So Bitter

A quiet picket line in the southern boot-heel of Missouri still colors my thoughts on labor journalism. I was a reporter for the first time, working for a weekly in a small town near the Mississippi River. Soybean prices were climbing, to the delight of the farmers. A local

businessman claimed to be the only registered Republican in the county, and I was never sure if he was joking. Half the town gathered in a restaurant at noon to eat lunch and revel in the televised news of Watergate.

It was at lunch, I think, that I learned that the long-running strike at an electrical-parts plant outside town was coming to a head. Soon the workers would vote on whether to keep the union and continue the strike, or decertify and go back to work. They had been out for months.

The plant owner's message, when I called, was that if the strike continued he would shut the plant permanently. This was a region of high unemployment, and the factory was one of the few new industries the town had been able to attract. The town fathers felt that gaining a reputation for having a militant work force would be disastrous.

All that remained for my story was the perspective from the picket line, but no one there would talk. The picketers stared at me like a tree full of owls. A woman picketer finally explained: nothing from the strikers' point of view, she said, had been printed in the



newspaper since the strike had begun, some months before I'd been hired. More than once the publisher had insulted the strikers in her column.

Earlier that summer, when members of the publisher's favorite church youth choir were arrested at a marijuana picnic, she had tried to kill the story. But the editor, a fair-minded man, had stood up to her. With the sincerity of a believer, I assured the strikers that my story would get printed and that it would

be balanced—and, finally, the picket line talked. But their skepticism was justified. The publisher ordered the story killed: the editor complied. Church choirs are one thing; labor is serious.

This was a small and probably isolated example, but I have wondered about how more significant stories are treated in more sophisticated places. I try to remember it when feeling complacent about the evenhandedness of journalism, or when listening to complaints about the press from the men and women of organized labor.

Their bitterness can be jarring. "It's almost to be assumed there will be hostility toward unions and they will be poorly covered," says Sam Pizzigati, associate director of the National Education

Association's communications department. "The real tragedy is that the media totally ignores working people. The message, day in and day out, is 'your life doesn't matter; it just doesn't count.' "

"I take it as a given that a newspaper is a business, and a business is going to protect its own interests," says Anthony Mazzocchi, who is now director of the New York-based Workers' Policy Project, a workers' think tank on economic and community issues. "I don't buy the notion of a free press."

There are statistics to back up such complaints. Writing in the Fall 1979 issue of *The Public Interest*, a neoconservative quarterly, Harvard faculty members, Richard L. Freeman and James L. Medoff found that "in the 1950s, 34% of the space devoted to unions in *Newsweek* and *Time* was unfavorable. That [statistic] has risen to 50% in the 1970s."

Class Bias

These days, organized labor seems more often dismissed or ignored than attacked, and without the help of any corporate cabal. Labor is out of fashion. "In recent years," observes A.H. Raskin, "interest has diminished. Editors, generally, think labor is not topical."

Perhaps one reason labor no longer interests journalists is that journalism today attracts a larger share of people who grew up viewing labor from the other side of the class fence than it did, say, a couple of decades ago. Sheldon Samuels, who worked as a reporter in Chicago in the 1950s and is now director of health, safety, and environment for the AFL-CIO's Industrial Union Department, recalls that in Chicago, the bars used to be "jammed with newspaper people and labor people. That just doesn't happen now. The background and attitudes of journalists have changed radically. One of the effects of making more money is who they talk to. They don't have lunch with us anymore."

In a similar vein, Warren Brown, who covers the auto industry and formerly covered labor for *The Washington Post*, observes, "In the age of TV and big bucks and power journalism, there is a considerable distance between the people who write and report, and the people they write and report about."

Writing in the January/February 1982 issue of *Working Papers* (now called *Modern Times*), a pseudonymous observer of the labor scene summed up the situation: "The labor movement and working people are far beyond the ken of most editors. They do not pal with labor people; they do not invite labor people to their offices; their friends are in the business community. Moreover, and more importantly, they consider business the mainstream of America. So whole staffs are assembled to cover business. This reporting is often not aggressive and innovative; it is, indeed, often unquestioning or biased reporting.

But at least the press gives its attention to business. Although the union movement is as old as this country, it is still considered something outside the mainstream."

On January 3, 1980, the front page of *The New York Times* had a story about Postmaster General William Bolger's promise to speed up delivery of mail in New York. Uniformed guards kept union officials from entering the meeting where he spoke to business and political figures.

Two days later, on an inside page, the *Times* reported that twelve "serious" safety violations had been found in the area of the New York Bulk and Foreign Mail Center where, three weeks earlier, a twenty-five-year-old mail handler, Michael McDermott, had been dragged into a conveyor belt and killed.

Officials at the hearing testified that there had been 1,765 accidents at the bulk center in 1979, and 2,547 the year before. A manager testified that he had been demoted for shutting down a conveyor belt he considered unsafe. McDermott's widow testified that her husband often complained to his supervisors about safety hazards, but



