

Letter from the Editor

Last month, we discussed how poorly the media cover labor. As noted, this matters because labor's top challenge is to let the public and its elected representatives know why a strong labor movement is in the national interest. Until that happens, our political, legislative, bargaining and organizing efforts will remain uphill battles—because people will pay us little heed.

So how can labor encourage even-handed reporting that depicts what unions do to boost productivity, efficiency, safety and quality while giving workers a voice on the job? Reporting that helps folks understand the links between a strong middle class and a robust labor movement?

We don't expect flattering coverage—we're not perfect, after all—but fair would do. This includes coverage of the NALC, since greater knowledge about Postal Service finances and practices would dramatically affect public and political views.

The first step in improving things, which will be the focus of this column, is for labor to identify the cause of the problem, so we can effectively address it. Why do journalists do such a poor job telling labor's story?

Too often, trade unionists get this wrong. We assume that reporters are biased against labor, that their corporate owners have it in for us, that advertisers pressure the news side to favor business interests.

What's wrong with this analysis? It's largely untrue. It lets labor off the hook too easily. It leads to resignation and inaction, because it's all someone else's fault and we can't change it. And it prevents us from addressing the real problem, about which we actually could do something. Instead, labor spends time lamenting unfair media treatment—and guess what? Things don't improve.

Let's dispel a few myths. Reporters aren't anti-union zealots who go to work every day planning to stick it to working people; in fact, many are union members. Second, it's extremely rare for media honchos to pressure journalists on stories. I covered labor for some 25 years, and not once did anyone in management try to improperly influence my reporting. Third, advertisers simply don't play a role in the editorial process.

The problems are far less conspiratorial and nefarious—and far more pedestrian and prac-


tical in nature. Today's reporters tend to be poorly prepared to write about unions or blue-collar issues, given their lack of knowledge or personal familiarity. A dearth of contacts compounds this. When a story breaks late in the day, journalists will easily rustle up a talkative corporate spokesman, but they are likely to have no clue about how to quickly reach a labor person.

On top of that, newsrooms face personnel challenges. Stretched thin, while facing constant competition in today's frenetic 24-hour media cycle, harried journalists generally lack the time to dig where they know little. The result is superficiality and recitation of conventional wisdom even when it's wrong—as it is these days about labor.

Shifting demographics worsen things, with media executives dubious that their largely suburban readers, listeners or viewers give a hoot about the labor movement, especially when the execs are convinced that unions are losing their luster, clout and members.

The daily consequence of all this is that editors and producers, not wanting to take ribbing from their peers in news meetings, don't push labor coverage. Stories that must be covered are usually downplayed and—in light of the above—reported from management's perspective. Longer term, editors tend not to dedicate someone to cover labor. Instead, they make it a fraction of a given reporter's workweek; they divide it among various staffers, with the political reporter handling the labor angle during elections and business reporters covering unions relevant for their beat; or they assign a general assignment reporter if a labor story breaks. This produces a lack of continuity and perspective.

The resulting paucity of good labor stories reinforces what editors felt anyway—the beat doesn't merit much attention. For its part, labor feels confirmed in its belief that the media won't give it a fair shake, so why bother trying? And the dysfunctional labor-media relationship continues its downward spiral.

The good news is that because the problem stems largely from practical factors, there are practical solutions. Next time, we'll conclude by discussing concrete steps labor can take to improve media-labor relations—and get its story out. 



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