

Letter from the Editor

Two months ago, we observed that coverage of labor lacks substance, fairness and volume, and we examined how this complicates labor's effort to get its message out while limiting public understanding of why unions still matter.

Subsequently, we looked at why journalists do such a poor job telling the story of working men and women and the institutions that represent them. Labor often assumes that this reflects reporter bias or corporate pressures. Actually, the problems are more practical than conspiratorial. Reporters lack knowledge and contacts while editors and producers are convinced that their audience doesn't care about a labor movement seemingly in decline.

As a result, the media increasingly ignore labor and trade unionists shrug and say "What's the use?" The vicious cycle continues—and coverage worsens.

We can change this.

Our first task is to educate reporters. That may sound patronizing toward a craft I practiced for more than 25 years and still do in various ways, but it's exactly what is needed.

We must let reporters know why labor is as relevant as ever and how a strong labor movement is in the national interest—actually a straightforward case to make. Historically, whenever labor's been robust we've had a growing middle class, with the converse also true. Structurally, a balanced industrial relations system—with management, labor and government all able to perform their roles and represent their constituencies—has been central to our shared prosperity. This can't occur if labor is weak and marginalized. Finally, the common sense argument: Why, as corporations grow more powerful and more concentrated, should workers be expected to cope as individuals, without a collective voice? That defies logic.

The time to present this big-picture outlook isn't when we're trying to push a story, but rather when things are quiet. We invite a reporter who covers labor (if you can find one) or economic issues, social justice or politics, to our branch office or local coffee shop. After we've talked broadly about labor, over a second cup of coffee or another time with lunch we discuss Postal Service issues, including the real financial picture, Saturday delivery and the community role that letter carriers play.

This accomplished, when a labor story comes down the pike, the reporter is armed with context—and with our contact info. Moreover, when his editor asks why anyone would care about a labor story, he can respond.

Our second chore is to effectively get out word about our news. Issuing mass press releases sounds reasonable, but it's actually a wonderful way to dampen interest. As a reporter, I turned press releases into paper airplanes aimed for the trash can. Why waste time reporting a story that others will produce anyway?

A targeted approach is far better. When appropriate, we decide which reporter might be best suited for a given story by virtue of her own interests and strengths, her media outlet's orientation and the market she serves. We tell that reporter why this is a great story for her, and, if the situation allows it, we let her know she has an exclusive.

That intrigues any reporter worth her salt. It puts a bounce in her step when she approaches her editor. And it excites the most hard-boiled editor, who at the afternoon news meeting now has a way to sell the story—"No one else has it!" Remember, a chief obstacle we face is indifference to our news. That's overcome by the prospect of a scoop, the juice of any newsroom.

Having fostered knowledge and interest, we try next to humanize the news. Why? Because whenever a reporter proposes a story, an editor inevitably asks, "Do you have any RPs?" (That means real people.)

No one is better suited to enliven a story than the labor movement, with its 16 million members. For example, when a report on safety is released, a union could contact a reporter and tell him it can provide two workers to illustrate the story. One, at a union plant, has been safe; the other, at a non-union shop with no safety committee, was badly hurt in an accident four years ago. Similarly, for a story on Saturday delivery, we provide a business or resident with a compelling reason for needing it. What seemed like boring stories to a reporter suddenly take on a local, human and colorful flavor.

I'd be glad to work with any of you on these ideas, or discuss other ways to promote good coverage on the local or national level. ✉



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