

Lessons For The U.S. Labor Movement

The Decline of the Printers Union

The strike at the San Francisco *Progress* is just the latest in a long series of attacks on the living standards of American workers in the print trades. The rise of corporate buccaneers in almost every industry has posed the issues of the class struggle in terms which have not been seen since the early decades of this century. Every time workers go on strike they confront an army of scabs and cops, backed by the authority of the courts and the entire legal machinery of the state. Where the union bureaucracy has managed to confine the struggle to the bargaining table, they have negotiated give-back concessions. Real wages, after inflation, have been declining for over a decade. In one industry after another the new breed of robber barons have looted entire companies, robbed the workers of their pension funds, built offshore plants and then pushed the crippled corporate remnants into bankruptcy courts, declaring that they can no longer "afford" to pay union wages.

The newspaper industry provides one of the most spectacular examples of the inability of the established trade-union leaders, with their pro-capitalist class-collaborationist strategy, to defend the gains of the past, or even preserve their dues base. Automation and concentration of ownership, combined with the passivity and treachery of the union leadership, has had disastrous effects on print workers. The past few decades have seen the growth of large newspaper chains and the increasing prevalence of the "joint operating agreements" which allow two unrelated publishers to share the same production facilities. The result has been massive reductions in jobs.

Historically, the most powerful union in the newspaper industry was the International Typographical Union (ITU) of the United States and Canada. The ITU, which had been shrinking in members and economic clout for years, was absorbed two years ago by the much larger Communications Workers of America (CWA). The progenitor of the ITU, one of the oldest of the traditional American Federation of Labor (AFL) fraternal craft unions, was founded in 1852. The print unions began as guild-like associations of skilled craftsmen in the late 18th century. The print industry paralleled the growth of capitalism from essentially a mercantile, trading economy to that of modern industrial capitalism. The shop-floor organizations of the unions known as "chapels" reflect their roots in the medieval European craft guilds. To circumvent prohibitions against journeymen combining against their masters, the printers designated their workroom a chapel and opened meetings with a prayer.

Printers: Left Wing of Craft Unionism

In a period when much of the working class was barely literate, the printer, who was able to construct readable, grammatically correct sentences as well as set

type and run presses, occupied an essential position in the economy. Banded together, printers had considerable power to maintain wages and improve their conditions because there were few people that could replace them in the event of a strike. Through a system of 6-year apprenticeships, a careful selection of new members weeded out those not loyal to the fraternity. Even with the advent of the linotype machine in the 1880s and the mechanization of typesetting, the skills necessary to operate a machine with more than 90 keys was sufficient to cause even the most greedy boss to think twice before provoking a strike.

The printers, who in 1940 were the second highest paid skilled craftsmen behind tool and die makers, developed a sophisticated set of fraternal benefits. In 1892 the printers union opened a sanitarium for tuberculosis patients that set a medical standard at the time for treatment of this disease. Tuberculosis was once known as the "printers disease" because of its frequency among printers subject to constant lead fumes from the typesetting machines. (The average age at death of ITU members at the turn of the century was 49 years.) As recently as 1944, more than 90 per cent of all monies spent by the ITU were for fraternal benefits of one kind or another.

The ITU leadership, whose ranks were among the most privileged of the working class, tended to share the social attitudes and political positions of the liberal petty bourgeoisie. The union supported the abolitionist, suffragette, public school, child-labor, 8-hour-day and five-day work-week movements. Although initially closed to women, the ITU leadership was smart enough to change this policy and effect a merger when female typographers formed their own union. Like virtually all the craft unions, the ITU has historically practiced racist job-trusting and there have never been more than a tiny handful of blacks in the union. The apprenticeships were handed from father to son and this ensured that the union membership retained its predominately Irish, German and Jewish ethnic composition.

When the American trade-union movement underwent a historic split over the issue of industrial unionism at the 1935 AFL Convention in Atlantic City, the ITU was one of the few unions that left the old craft-unionist AFL and founded the Congress of Industrial Organizations. Along with the United Mineworkers Union, the ITU was one of the few unions which refused to observe the anti-communist clause of the 1948 Taft-Hartley Act.

Technology and the Decline of the ITU

In the postwar period, the technology developed by the government during the war, both in offset printing and computers and electronics, began to find practical applications in the plants where ITU members worked. Beginning in the early 1950s, the publishers began to

fund the search for ways to replace the system of “hot metal” typesetting that required the use of the linotype with its complicated keyboard. By the end of the Eisenhower years, the Fairchild Camera Co. introduced a machine with a modified typewriter keyboard that produced coded, perforated paper tape that in turn drove the linotype.

Later these paper tapes were used to drive primitive computer-controlled phototypesetting equipment that could produce as much type in ten minutes as a linotype could turn out in seven hours. This development had the immediate effect of de-skilling the job of assembling pages of type, from one of a complicated system of hand labor to one of pasting the phototypeset film on page-sized sheets of paper from which plates for presses could be produced photographically. Today’s computer-driven equipment can produce a day’s production on the linotype in a few seconds.

During the postwar witchhunt of the 1950s, the socialist and Communist leadership in the big city locals of the ITU was pushed aside and both on the local and international level, a more conservative layer of “business” union bureaucrats came to power in the ITU. This paralleled developments in other CIO unions. Frightened by the threat of the new “cold type” printing processes, the union bureaucrats, at first hoping to adapt, opened a training school for union members in Colorado Springs. Before long they could see that the new technology would require far fewer people to produce the same amount of printed matter. Their “answer” was to negotiate contracts in both Canada and the U.S. with deadly attrition clauses that “guaranteed” jobs to those already employed in the industry. What this did was guarantee only that there would be a steadily declining membership. In 1960 there were 103,000 active members of the ITU—at the time of the merger with the CWA there were fewer than 50,000. The *New York Times* which employed 1,200 union printers in 1960, has barely 300 today.

As ITU membership declined and equipment was introduced that required less skill, the employers went on the offensive against the ITU—with devastating effect. This occurred at a time when the newspaper business itself had begun to change. The development of television in the postwar period squeezed newspaper profits in ways which even the technological revolution in the shops could not begin to address. Coupled with the departure of important layers of readers to the suburbs during the 1950s and ‘60s, the competition for advertising dollars drove a number of big-city dailies out of business. In New York City, for example, at the end of WW II there were eight English-language dailies (as well as three non-English ones). Today only three are left. San Francisco went from five daily papers down to two.

Monopoly Capitalism in the Newspaper Business

High school civics textbooks notwithstanding, the newspaper business has never had anything to do with the altruistic exercise of the First Amendment or the “people’s right to know.” It is about profits. While it does

serve an ideological function in capitalist society, ultimately the daily newspaper is a commodity chiefly distinguished from other commodities in that the final product is a medium for advertising other commodities. Sales and subscription revenue barely pays for the paper it is printed on. The overwhelming majority of publishing revenue comes from advertising. When the competition for a finite number of advertising dollars reached a certain point, the music stopped, and, just as in musical chairs, someone was out. Often, failing newspapers were purchased by their rivals and combined under a hyphenated title. In other cases, media-conglomerates like Gannett, Hearst, or Knight-Ridder would buy an ailing publication and then, after pumping in new capital, and cutting advertising rates, turn the tables and put its rivals out of business.

In 1971 the newspaper chains convinced a liberal U.S. Congress to pass the “Newspaper Preservation Act” which legalized “Joint Operating Agreements.” Under a JOA, previously competing newspapers pool their mechanical operations such as advertising sales, typesetting, press work and delivery systems, while maintaining separate editorial facilities. Profits are split according to a previously arranged formula. For certain newspapers the Newspaper Preservation Act carved out a unique exemption from the Sherman Antitrust Act. By fixing advertising rates and sharing markets, existing papers could effectively control entry into the industry.

Today the newspaper business is almost an exclusive preserve of the giant chains. Competing daily newspapers have virtually disappeared. According to a resolution sent to the U.S. Justice Department last June by the Association of Alternative Newsweeklies, 98 percent of American cities have monopoly daily newspaper combines with single ownership or joint operating agreement operations. And they are extremely profitable. Robert Picard, professor at Emerson College in Boston and author of *Press Concentration and Monopoly* was quoted in the *New York Times* on 18 July 1988: “Daily newspapers earn an average of about 19 percent on sales, more than double the average for other manufacturing businesses, and the companies with joint operations earn about twice what other papers earn.” Newspaper publishing is one of the most profitable industries in America today, ranking with pharmaceuticals, oil, mineral extraction and broadcasting.

An interesting case of a “failing” newspaper was the *Detroit Free Press* owned by the giant Gannett Co. Inc., which petitioned the Justice Department in 1987 to be allowed to enter into the biggest yet JOA with the competing *Detroit News* (owned by the nearly as large Knight-Ridder chain). Both newspapers are among the 10 largest in the country and Detroit is among the six largest advertising markets. The JOA was approved by the U.S. Justice Department—four days before Edwin Meese departed as Attorney General—over the objections of his own staff and the administrative-law judge in the case. In San Francisco, the *Chronicle* and the Hearst-owned *Examiner* have had a JOA since 1965 (preceding the Newspaper Preservation Act legislation by six years) and have systematically crushed their compe-

tion. Those not driven out of business have been bought out by other media giants. The *Santa Rosa Press Democrat* is now owned by the *New York Times*, the *Palo Alto Times-Tribune* is owned by the *Chicago Tribune* (which also owns the *New York Daily News*), the *San Jose Mercury-News* is owned by the Knight-Ridder chain and the *Hayward Review* was recently bought by Media General Inc., a publishing conglomerate.

Anti-Communism Leads to Defeats for Unionists

In the printing unions, particularly in the ITU, the generation of the union's leadership that fought to build the CIO and fought against the Taft-Hartley Act were elected primarily from the big-city locals where the Communist Party and other left organizations had their base. The history of print workers in the publishing industry for the past 25 years has been a history of the same anti-communist "business unionism" that had become the standard in the rest of the union movement with the witchhunt era of U.S. Senator Joseph McCarthy. Radical and Communist leaders of individual locals and international unions were driven out of office by the hundreds and replaced by small-town, small-time job-seekers with conservative politics, who believed that "labor relations" were a matter of mutual interest of the capitalists and the working class. It is this layer of consciously class-collaborationist bureaucrats, wedded to the Democratic Party, who have run the print unions into the ground. They considered themselves "pragmatists." The sum total of their political wisdom was that no problem was so serious that it couldn't be solved by the right compromise.

When the postwar era of U.S. imperialism's domination of the world economy ended in the early 1970s, the American bourgeoisie began a frontal assault on the wages and conditions that the unions had won in previous decades. Where they didn't export entire industries offshore to take advantage of cheap labor in third-world countries, they made massive investments in automated equipment to drive down labor costs. Using the reams of anti-labor legislation passed after World War II, they then came after the unions for major concessions in contract negotiations. In industry after industry, the "realistic" labor bureaucrats delivered up their members' standard of living as a sacrifice to ensure the continued flow of profits. The union leadership, tied politically, socially and economically to the Democratic Party, spent their energy trying to get "friends of labor" elected to state and federal legislatures in the vain hope that they would intervene and save the day.

In the few instances where the printing union bureaucrats were forced to fight, the narrow apolitical perspective of the leadership led only to defeats. In a landmark strike at the liberal *Washington Post* in October 1975, the pressmen and stereotypers of Local 6 of the Newspaper and Graphic Communications Workers Union walked out in a contract dispute and were immediately replaced with scabs. The pressmen, knowing that scabs were waiting on the upper floors of the paper to take their jobs, sabotaged the presses and immediately set up a

militant picket line that subjected some of the scabs to a little proletarian justice. The liberals of the *Post* then published a scab edition of the paper which waxed indignant about the "immorality" of the strikers and compared them to assassins, terrorists and airplane hijackers. The Newspaper Guild (reporters and editors), and later the ITU, crossed the pressmen's picket line and the strike was defeated with two members of the pressman's union drawing long jail terms.

Similar scenarios had been played out earlier in Los Angeles, Portland, and Miami. Ten years later the *Chicago Tribune* was struck by the ITU, and while the strike became a popular cause in the Chicago labor movement, the union leaders managed, through ineptitude and cowardice, yet another defeat. In every one of these strikes it was the union bureaucrats' fear of confronting the government (run for the most part by the very Democratic Party politicians they had supported) that led to the defeat. When injunctions were issued, the unions obeyed. When police brought scabs through their picket lines, the bureaucrats stood by prattling about the "hopelessness" of standing up to the scab-herders. Had the previous generations of workers shown such respect for capitalist legality there never would have been any unions in the first place.

For a Fighting Labor Movement!

The wave of defeats suffered by American workers in recent years underlines the bankruptcy of business unionism. Lane Kirkland and the rest of the U.S. labor bigwigs cannot even defend the existence of the workers organizations from which they derive their parasitic existence. Their pro-capitalist business unionism is *liquidating* the gains won over decades of militant struggle in the past.

While the labor bureaucracy is organically connected to its base, the typical bureaucrat enjoys many a lifestyle closer to that of middle management. The labor tops serve as ideological police for the capitalists—that is why socialists have traditionally labelled them the "labor lieutenants of capital." Their task is to contain and channel the struggles of the proletariat and promote class-collaboration by adapting the pernicious ideology of class peace to the daily events of the class struggle.

The decline of the once powerful ITU holds a lesson for all those who have to work for their living. The owners of the means of production are *compelled* by the inexorable logic of the market to attempt to drive down the living standards of *all* sectors of the working class—even the most privileged. The recent string of wins for the employers is directly due to the cowardice and treachery of the professional union misleaders. Nevertheless, the union movement on this continent wields enormous social power. Workers need a union leadership that understands that the interests of the capitalists and those of the workers are diametrically opposed. Such a class-struggle union leadership must teach the ranks not to rely on the goodwill of the employers and their courts, but rather the mass strength of the working class. This means breaking with the twin parties of the capitalist class, and forging a workers party.

A workers party worthy of the name must start from the understanding that the capitalist government can never represent the interests of the oppressed and exploited. Such a party must champion the rights of all those trampled underfoot by this system of greed and exploitation. It must defend all partial gains won in the

past. But a class-struggle leadership for the proletariat must be more than a movement of protest and reform—it must be animated by a determination to fight for a government of working people pledged to expropriate the capitalists, and for the construction of an egalitarian, socialist order. ■