
From: David McCumber
Sent: Wednesday, June 3, 2020 4:08 PM
To: BIL Editorial Dept
Subject: A note to Gazette staffers

June 3, 2020

Gazette Colleagues:

I can't start this without thanking every one of you for the amazing work you've done during COVID. I'm awed by your performance over the past two months-plus — from covering the pandemic itself to taking on new challenges, helping your co-workers however possible, and producing a steady stream of content to grace our newspaper and our website, which has had record traffic.

The purpose of this letter is to let you know how I feel about the news that you will soon be voting on whether a union will be formed in our newsroom.

Please forgive me for sounding even more ancient than I am. But in more than 50 years in the business of journalism, I've been on both sides of this discussion. I'd like to pass along some of what I've learned in the process, and place it in the context of today's media world.

First, I was a Guild member, then a manager at the San Francisco Examiner. The relationship between the Guild and the newsroom leadership was difficult at best, which was new to me, and I didn't like it. Sometimes Guild leaders would grieve a management decision — for instance, a beat change or a schedule change — just to appear to be doing something for the members, even though the grievance did not have a basis in the contract. Situations like those, I think, are best discussed with the journalists involved, not with a union officer.

I left the Examiner a few years before a crippling strike in 1994. While the biggest issue that led to the strike involved Teamster drivers and layoffs, the Guild was caught up in the strike and I believe it ultimately contributed to significant reductions in the newsroom. During the strike a nonunion newspaper delivery driver suffered a fractured skull when he was hit with a lead pipe, and a Teamster driver was electrocuted scaling a power pole. The strike greatly weakened the underdog Examiner, which soon was sold and ceased to be the muckraking, crusading newspaper I loved.

Years later, in Seattle, I was the managing editor of the Post-Intelligencer when a disagreement over wages and working conditions — primarily at the rival Seattle Times — led to a strike in late 2000. Our Guild members, being part of the same local, were obliged to strike at the same time. The P-I Guild members were out for 38 days; the Times kept its Guild members out for 49 days, and even then did not allow many of them back to work for months afterward. Some never returned.

When our Guild members were able to return, they did so and we welcomed them with open arms; they were our colleagues and we needed them back. But again, even though the P-I didn't have much to do with the strike starting, it took a disproportionate toll on us as the weaker member of the joint operating agreement and I believe it contributed to the paper's closure in 2009.

Now, as newspapers' finances are much more tenuous than they were in 2000, an event like that could easily kill a community newspaper. That concerns me.

A decade later, I was on Hearst's negotiating committee in contract talks with the United Auto Workers, which represented newsroom employees at one of the newspapers I supervised in Connecticut. The UAW's representation of the newsroom had come about years before. The union was all but powerless; the might of the entire union could not be brought to bear at a small newspaper in Connecticut, and everyone knew it. The contract negotiations resulted in a three-year contract with a 1 1/2 percent raise the first year, and "flat" wages the second and third years – but of course union dues continued apace.

Similarly, the Guild has not shown much power in recent years.

I turned down the job of managing editor of the Cleveland Plain Dealer in 1985, opting instead to go to San Francisco. The reason: I was told by the Plain Dealer executive editor that a big part of my role would be day-to-day wrangling with the Guild — the proud and then-powerful Guild Local No. 1, where the union began in the United States.

It's worth noting that today, Guild Local No. 1 no longer has any members, and the union has been driven out of the Plain Dealer, which is a pale shadow of the great newspaper it once was.

If the Guild can't make any headway in a labor market like Cleveland, losing its No. 1 franchise, what can it do in Billings?

The answer, in my view, is "not much." But in the process, it can divide and cause bitterness. It can get in the way of direct communication between me and you.

Look at Casper. The resulting contract, negotiated in good faith, resulted in small increases that amount to less than the increases in this newsroom over the same period — and barely covered Guild dues. It's also worth pointing out that the Casper contract, as just about every union contract does, has provisions for layoffs. It did not produce job security.

The truth is that the Guild cannot produce revenue that will increase job security. It cannot produce revenue that will increase wages and benefits. It can only ask the company for those things as part of a negotiation.

I wish I could paint a rosier picture of newspaper unions in today's world. I can't.

I care about the Gazette. I care about everyone in the newsroom and I want the best for all of you in your careers. If I thought this move were constructive, I'd tell you so. Based on my experience, I believe it's anything but.

Thanks for reading.

— David

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