

An exchange on the Detroit newspaper strike

9 July 1998

Letter from BN

Please stop quoting from the *Detroit News* and Gannett's most profitable paper, *USA Today*. There are news sources owned by other companies which are not engaged in a three-year lock-out of their workers.

BN

Reply by the Editorial Board

Dear BN,

We appreciate your sense of solidarity with the newspaper workers, but we must disagree with the suggestion that we cease citing and, presumably, reading the Gannett papers in light of the defeat of the *Detroit News/Free Press* strike.

First of all, as a matter of general principle, we are not in favor of declaring this or that product of the capitalist media--book, newspaper, journal or movie--beyond the pale. Declaring that publications should not be read because we disapprove of the policies, opinions or actions of their publishers has, we believe, rather dangerous implications. Moreover, in dealing with what is essentially a source of news, it can hardly serve the interest of workers to censor that information because we disapprove of its source. When we quote from a Gannett publication, it is because we believe that the information has an intrinsic significance and should be brought to the attention of workers.

Naturally, there may be circumstances when considerations of class solidarity override abstractly conceived (though not unimportant) principles of free speech and the unlimited flow of information. But it is one thing to boycott a struck company during a labor battle when that boycott is a component of a broader strategy to defeat the employers. It is quite another when this tactic is reduced to an open-ended and essentially useless ploy, to be continued even after all real struggle has long since been called off. This is the case in the *Detroit News/Free Press* dispute. We simply refuse to go along with the pretense that some type of

battle is still being waged at the *News/Free Press*. We will not assist in pulling the wool over the workers' eyes.

It is necessary to say straight out: the newspaper workers have suffered a defeat. As socialists, our responsibility is to examine and explain the causes of this debacle. As we have written before and at great length, the defeat of the strike was not the fault of the workers, who displayed considerable desire to fight. Rather, it was caused by the policies of the union officials and the AFL-CIO leadership as a whole.

Over the past two decades the AFL-CIO bureaucracy has repeatedly used open-ended boycotts to attempt to cover its refusals to take the industrial and political measures necessary to defend the jobs and living conditions of its members. Time and again, the boycotts have proven entirely ineffective, eventually degenerating into something that is more of a nuisance for consumers than a serious threat to business interests. Generally, these boycotts have been eagerly seized upon by union bureaucrats as their weapon of choice because it relieves them of any responsibility to mobilize the strength of the working class on a broader and more direct basis. As we have seen from countless struggles over the last two decades, the proclamation of a boycott is--next to the calling of a rally at which the Rev. Jesse Jackson is the principal speaker--the surest indication that a strike is in its death throes.

This is not to call into question the motives of all those who have supported such boycotts. But one must examine the implicit perspective behind support for measures that really do not mobilize the strength of the working class against big business. If the working class does not rely upon its own forces, then it must look to another force to resolve the problems it confronts. In the final analysis, this other force is the capitalist class itself, or sections of it. Behind support for the boycott often lies the hope that big business will simply change its mind and pursue a more conciliatory policy towards

the workers.

But such an outlook is at odds with reality. The antagonism between the working class and big business is an objective one rooted in the conflict between private ownership of the means of production (the factories, financial institutions and the mass media) and the social character of modern economic life. The policies pursued by multinational giants like Gannett are those that advance their interests, interests which are dictated to an important extent by the capitalist market itself with its unending drive for private profit and ruthless competition among the major firms. Our real objection is to the continued subordination of the well-being of the working people to this market, and to the argument that the former is compatible with the latter.

We hope that you will take the above points in the fraternal spirit with which they are intended.

Yours sincerely,

the WSWs Editorial Board

A second letter from BN

First of all, let me thank you for taking the time to personally respond to my earlier messages. I do agree with numerous points in your response (especially those pertaining to the mismanagement of the strike by CWA, Teamster, and AFL-CIO officials). I guess my irritation at the use of Gannett papers stems from having spent the last two months working with three strikers from the *DFP* on a grocery organizing drive in Flint. While indeed many of the strikers have left the picket lines (some crossing and others seeking jobs elsewhere), the spirit and fight which remain in the aforementioned strikers are truly inspiring and a shining example of the kind of dedication necessary to defeat the interests of corporate America and the 'democratic' government which it controls. I will certainly continue to frequent your site, but will cringe whenever a Gannett source appears.

Thanks again for responding to my original messages.

In solidarity,

BN



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