

Unions settle with Detroit News and Free Press: lessons of another AFL-CIO debacle

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Last month the Teamsters and allied AFL-CIO unions formally ended their five-and-one-half-year dispute with the *Detroit News* and *Free Press* on terms dictated by management. The newspaper workers went on strike in July of 1995. The union leadership called off the walkout in February of 1997, after failing to mount an effective struggle against the strike-breaking operation mounted by the *News* and the *Free Press* and their respective parent companies, Gannett and Knight-Ridder.

For the past several years the Teamsters and the AFL-CIO have been seeking to work out a formula that would allow the unions to resume their status as bargaining agents at the newspapers. On December 17 the last of six union locals ratified an agreement sanctioning huge wage and job cuts. A few days later the Metropolitan Council of Newspaper Unions announced an end to its readership and advertising boycott of the *News* and *Free Press*.

The agreements go far beyond the concessions originally demanded by management, imposing pay scales and work rules that not long ago would have been considered “non-union.” The unions have also abandoned hundreds of workers who are still displaced or blacklisted.

The contracts for Teamsters Locals 372 and 2040, the largest bargaining units and the last to ratify, contain deep pay cuts and major changes in work rules that give management virtually a free hand to do whatever it wants. The workforce covered by Local 372, the bargaining agent for delivery drivers, has been reduced to 750, down from 1,125 when the strike began. Local 2040, which covered 800 mailroom workers in 1995, now has only 350 employees within its jurisdiction. Pay cuts instituted during the strike will remain in place. Mailers now earn around \$11 an hour, compared to \$16 before the strike. Workers will get a mere 2 percent annual pay raise plus a \$1,000 bonus if circulation increases by more than 100,000 copies.

The Teamsters contracts also contain open shop clauses,

meaning that new-hires do not have to join the union or pay dues.

Union officials exerted enormous pressure on the membership to extract a “yes” vote. Nevertheless, opposition among the rank and file ran deep. According to one report, Local 2040 members ratified the settlement by a vote of 36 to 33.

The final outcome of the dispute illustrates the antagonism between the AFL-CIO apparatus and the working class. Despite having crushed the strike, management decided that it was in its interests to retain the unions to help keep the workers under control. For their part, the union leaders were only too eager to cooperate with the newspaper bosses so as to retain their salaries and other perks.

The deal imposed on the Detroit newspaper workers was predictable and foreseen by the Socialist Equality Party (see our February, 1997 article “A fresh lesson: the end of the Detroit newspaper strike and the crisis of the labor movement”). It is in line with the settlement imposed by the United Auto Workers at Caterpillar and the result of scores of other labor struggles of the 1980s and 1990s that were isolated and betrayed by the AFL-CIO, beginning with the 1981 PATCO air traffic controllers strike.

In each case the AFL-CIO bureaucracy sabotaged any attempt by workers to mobilize broader support and counter the use of strike-breakers and armed guards, backed by court injunctions and other pro-management actions by government agencies. The union leadership sought, on the basis of the defeats it helped inflict on the rank and file, to bolster its alliance with big business, embracing the corporatist policy of union-management “partnership.”

The owners of the *Detroit News* and *Free Press*, the Gannett and Knight-Ridder media conglomerates, deliberately provoked the newspaper strike as part of a

plan to impose a drastic restructuring aimed at slashing costs and boosting profits. This assault on the workers had been launched several years earlier when the two papers instituted a Joint Operating Agreement, agreed to by the unions, which resulted in a wage freeze and layoffs.

In the months before the strike the newspapers obtained the services of a professional strike-breaking outfit and laid plans for continuing publication and distribution with non-union personnel. As it became clear that management planned an all out assault, the unions responded by offering concessions.

Only when the newspapers ended the automatic deduction of union dues from workers' paychecks did the unions call a strike on July 13, 1995. Immediately, the unions announced that their main strategy would be a consumer boycott. Union officials brazenly lied to the workers, claiming that previous struggles which had relied on a consumer boycott, such as the strikes at the *New York Daily News* and *Pittsburgh Press*, had ended in victories.

For months, workers were left to stand by while scabs escorted by private security guards and police crossed their picket lines. The leadership of the Teamsters and the United Auto Workers, with a combined membership of several hundred thousand members in the Detroit area, left the strikers on their own.

They gave no thought to organizing a broader struggle, mobilizing the working class in the Detroit area to shut down production of the struck newspapers. Such an appeal was against every instinct of the trade union bureaucracy. Furthermore, it threatened the narrow interests of the union apparatus. The perks and privileges of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy have been increasingly tied to direct forms of collaboration with management, including the establishment of joint programs and committees funded by the companies in which union officials participate. Any attempt to mobilize support for the newspaper workers in the form of mass picketing or sympathy strikes would have threatened the access of the union bureaucracy to a large share of its income.

Moreover, any serious attempt to stop scabs from crossing the newspaper workers' picket lines would have entailed a collision with Democratic Party officials such as Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer. Like Democratic mayors in dozens of strikes, from the *Chicago Tribune* to the *New York Daily News*, Archer had mobilized hundreds of police to escort scabs across union picket lines. A serious effort to oppose this strike-breaking would have exposed the anti-working-class character of the alliance between

the AFL-CIO and the Democrats.

From the outset, the overriding concern of UAW President Stephen Yokich, Detroit Metro AFL-CIO President Ed Scribner and other union officials was to block any effective struggle, while maneuvering to secure a contract that would preserve the union apparatus.

In February of 1997 the unions ordered an unconditional return to work. Management refused to reinstate strikers except as positions became available. The AFL-CIO leadership refused to acknowledge that its policies had failed. Instead, it claimed that the surrender represented a clever means of continuing the struggle.

AFL-CIO President John Sweeney and other officials assured workers that vindication would come through an appeal filed with the National Labor Relations Board. However, last summer, after a tedious sojourn through the legal system, a Washington federal appellate court threw out unfair labor practice charges filed by the unions against the *News* and *Free Press*.

In 1999 two smaller unions, the typographers and photoengravers, signed concessionary contracts with the *News* and *Free Press*. In November 2000 the Newspaper Guild and pressmen settled.

Teamsters President James P. Hoffa engineered the agreements that formally ended the dispute. Hoffa supporters had claimed that his administration, installed in 1998, would revitalize the Teamsters organization. However, Hoffa, at the time of the strike a lawyer with a major Detroit Teamsters local, remained in the background throughout most of the walkout and its aftermath.

At a news conference held December 20 following ratification of the Teamsters contracts, Hoffa urged workers to put aside their anger and let bygones be bygones. He announced that he would personally resume subscribing to the *News* and *Free Press* and called on all Detroit workers to follow his example. He declared, "Our goal is to rebuild the relationship amongst the newspapers, their employees and their unions."



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