

The firing of the New York Times' Jill Abramson

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The firing of Jill Abramson as executive editor of the *New York Times* May 14 lifted the lid on the US media establishment. Displayed for all to see was the money-grubbing, careerism and egotism that dominates this filthy little world.

The *New York Times* is a principal mouthpiece of the American corporate elite. It has become one of the most dishonest publications on earth, since its editors and reporters are assigned an impossible task: framing the interests of a predatory, crisis-ridden elite in the vestiges of traditional liberal terminology.

One makes sense of many articles in the *Times* these days either by reading between the lines and calculating what has been deliberately omitted, or through a process of deciphering that involves *reading backward* from the obvious ideological slant and a priori conclusions of the author to the details and arguments offered as “unbiased” facts. The unobvious hand of the State Department, the Pentagon or the CIA—or some combination thereof—can often be perceived in the *Times*’ news gathering and commentary.

Over the past decade, the *Times* has defended the neo-colonial operations of the Bush and Obama administrations, while firmly backing the onslaught against constitutional and elementary democratic rights carried out by the American state, with an inevitable degree of handwringing and the occasional caveats. All the time it has cheered on the stock market boom, the parasitism and swindling of the financial aristocracy and the resulting immiseration of wide layers of the US population.

The newspaper’s leading personnel, including Jill Abramson, her predecessor and her successor at the helm of the *Times*, have all emerged out of these profoundly reactionary social and economic processes.

Controversy surrounds the immediate circumstances of Abramson’s dismissal. Her defenders claim that Abramson recently discovered she was receiving less in pay and benefits than Bill Keller, the executive editor before her, and had “pushed” to remedy that situation. In this scenario, Abramson is a martyr to the cause of equal pay for women.

The *Times*’ publisher Arthur O. Sulzberger, Jr., insisted in an email on May 15 that, in fact, in 2013, Abramson’s “total compensation package was more than 10 percent higher than that of her predecessor, Bill Keller, in his last full year as Executive Editor, which was 2010. It was also higher than his total compensation in any previous year.”

The pay in question, equal or otherwise, put Abramson (and

Keller) in the top fraction of income earners in the US. According to Ken Auletta of the *New Yorker*: “As executive editor, Abramson’s starting salary in 2011 was \$475,000, compared to Keller’s salary that year, \$559,000. Her salary was raised to \$503,000, and—only after she protested—was raised again to \$525,000.” In addition to her salary, Abramson was eligible for “bonuses, stock grants, and other long-term incentives.”

Sulzberger, in a statement, asserted that Abramson’s departure had “nothing to do with pay or gender.” Rather, he insisted, the firing resulted from “a series of issues, including arbitrary decision-making, a failure to consult and bring colleagues with her, inadequate communication and the public mistreatment of colleagues.”

According to Auletta’s account, the final straw involved Abramson’s offering a position to Janine Gibson of Britain’s *Guardian* newspaper as a second managing editor of digital operations at the *Times* without consulting Dean Baquet, the first managing editor and now Abramson’s successor.

Whatever the circumstances, Abramson’s firing instantly became an immense and powerfully felt issue for certain small circles in the US.

Her dismissal was followed by much lamentation and gnashing of teeth by feminist and left-liberal critics of the move. Was she fired “because she was a woman?” The “ugliness of being a woman boss” or “a woman leader” was on certain minds. “We’re back to square one” as far as women in the upper echelons of journalism are concerned, suggested another commentator.

Frida Ghitis, writing at CNN.com, observed, “You can draw your own conclusions about why Jill Abramson was fired, but as we look at the history of her tenure as executive editor of The New York Times, the world’s most prestigious and influential newspaper, and learn details about how it came to an end, women everywhere are shaking their heads.”

Really? Women everywhere were shaking their heads?

“The departure of Jill Abramson,” commented Rebecca Traister of the *New Republic*, “is a bigger and far grimmer story about a uniquely powerful woman, whose rise and whose firing will now become another depressingly representative chapter in the story of women’s terribly slow march toward social, professional and economic parity.”

Michelle Goldberg, of the *Nation*, headlined her comment, “Jill Abramson was right,” although the reader discovers that Abramson was “right,” according to Goldberg, about relatively

trivial internal issues at the *Times*. The *Nation* columnist takes note of the claim that Abramson was fired for being “pushy,” and goes on: “The *Times* denies this, but unless it’s disproven, women across the country have reason to find it chilling.”

Again, which women?

At the *Progressive*, Ruth Conniff assured us in the headline of her comment that the “NY Times Firing of Abramson Hurts Women.” She concluded the piece by arguing that the manner of Abramson’s firing by the *Times* is “not good for women as a group.”

How so? Is there the slightest proof that the employment of a female executive editor by the *New York Times*, for somewhere between \$525,000 and one million dollars a year (or more), had the slightest impact on the conditions of women “as a group”?

On the contrary, there is considerable evidence that the gap between the Abramsons and others in her income group, on the one hand, and the vast majority of women, on the other, is growing ever wider.

The Institute for Public Policy Research in Britain, for example, in a report entitled “Twentieth century feminism failed working class women,” noted that “Fifty years of feminism has seen the wages of ‘the average woman’ narrow the gap with ‘the average man’ but the differences between women remain far greater than the differences between women and men.”

Professional women born in 1958, the study found, “earned nearly three times as much as women in unskilled jobs born in the same year (198 per cent extra), while professional men earned almost half as much more (45 per cent extra) more than men in unskilled jobs.” One would suspect the same general trend holds true for the US as well.

According to a review in the *New York Review of Books*, Alison Wolf in *The Women at the Top*, a study of upper middle class “professional women” across the globe, argues that “couples at the top lead very different lives, not only from the lower classes, but from previous generations. Within the households, husbands and wives are virtually interchangeable. Both tend to be high earners, and both tend to be equally competent at childcare and household tasks. ... They now have more in common with each other than either has with members of their own sex in the lower classes.”

Of course, upper middle class members of both sexes have always had “more in common” with each other than with anyone in the “lower classes,” but the exacerbation of this situation is clearly a noteworthy social phenomenon, with definite political and ideological implications.

In the comments from many of Abramson’s defenders, one hears the angry collective voice of this layer of well-heeled women whose considerable gains have only made it more selfish, more rapacious and more envious of the male-dominated corporate and financial aristocracy to whose exalted realm it aspires. For this social grouping, the *Times*’ executive editor was “a role model and beacon of hope,” in the words of Barbara Cochran, the Curtis B. Hurley Chair in Public Affairs Journalism at the Missouri School of Journalism.

This stratum of well-paid professional women is also one of the key constituencies of the pseudo-left, and helps explain the obsession of groups such as the International Socialist

Organization (ISO) with gender and identity politics. A great deal of wealth and privilege is at stake in the struggle for “gender parity” in journalism, academia, unions, business and government.

Even a scoundrel, of course, can be the victim of an undemocratic attack and worthy of defense. But there is nothing progressive that attaches itself to Abramson’s case, nothing that elicits sympathy. Nor is there anything exceptional in her entire career—she has not been identified even by her defenders with any exposé or journalistic coup. To be blunt, she is a journalistic and intellectual zero.

The entire sordid affair at the *Times* is about money, with perhaps the added element of ferocious personal ambition and ego. Abramson is the product of right-wing feminism, the fitting progeny of Gloria Steinem and Margaret Thatcher. One suspects that the *Times*’ editor was used to scheming, running roughshod over people and having her way, and somehow or other it all eventually blew up in her face.

As for the editorial content and reporting of the *New York Times*, Abramson’s reign marked the further integration of the newspaper into the misinformation apparatus of the White House, Defense Department and various intelligence agencies.

What was the record of the *Times* during her two years and eight months as executive editor? A brief recapitulation would have to include the newspaper’s vociferous backing for economic and military aggression against Iran, Syria and China; its defense of drone murder and the military lockdown of Boston; its contributions to the smear campaigns against Bradley (Chelsea) Manning, Julian Assange and Edward Snowden; its support for the privatization of Medicare, defense of Obamacare and continued campaign against “overtesting” (i.e., its indefatigable support for reducing health care costs at the expense of the working class population); and, most recently, the *Times*’ especially vile cover-up of the fascist-led coup in Ukraine, its publication of fake photos supposedly claiming to prove Russian intervention in the eastern part of the country and its suppression of ultra-right atrocities in Odessa and elsewhere.

A record to be proud of ... ! Of course Abramson wasn’t fired for any of this, no portion of which will hinder her from finding a new lucrative source of income.

She belongs to the wealthy, anti-democratic media and political establishment in the US, which has swung dramatically to the right in recent decades. The distasteful and unseemly squabble between Abramson, Baquet, Sulzberger and the rest will serve a useful purpose to the extent that it further discredits the state-run propaganda organ that the *Times* has become.



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