

“What’s happening here is emblematic of what’s going on across the country”

Detroit newspaper workers protest contract takeaways

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Workers at the *Detroit News* and *Free Press* newsroom and their supporters picketed company offices Wednesday to protest the slow pace of contract negotiations. The members of the Newspaper Guild are currently working without a contract.

Workers told the *World Socialist Web Site* they are angry over company demands that employees pay for all future health care cost increases. They are also opposing management’s inadequate pay offer, under conditions where workers several years ago took a 6.5 percent pay cut.

According to a handout by the Newspaper Guild, management is refusing a contract extension and, among other cuts, wants to make more full-time jobs part-time, which in some cases may mean workers do not qualify for health care coverage. Workers also complain of stiff payments for parking since the offices were moved to the former Federal Reserve Building in 2014.

Tresa Baldas, a federal courts reporter with the *Detroit Free Press*, photo, with long sign said, “We want them to respect what we do and show us that respect by paying us for what we are worth. The company has no problem bragging about all the prizes they have won and how great our journalists are and what great work we do, but they don’t want to recognize it, and frankly, I am tired of that.”

Kathleen, a reporter who has worked for the *Detroit Free Press* for 15 years, said, “We’re back to 2003 wages and we’re taking cuts while the company is buying more properties and paying its top management bonuses. We love serving the public as journalists, but

it’s unsustainable. We didn’t do this to become rich but we are facing corporate greed.”

Michael Hodges, a journalist at the *Detroit News* since 1991, said, “The *Detroit News* has adopted a ‘no negotiations’ position and they are demanding the abolition of seniority and severance packages. It’s as if they are saying, ‘Dissolve the union and then we’ll talk.’”

Detroit was the scene of a bitter newspaper strike in the 1990s (1995-97). Management mounted a massive strikebreaking effort, using police and private security to bring scabs across picket lines.

After leaving workers isolated on the picket line for months on end, the Teamsters, Newspaper Guild and other unions ordered an unconditional return to work on management terms in 1997. The unions abandoned hundreds of workers fired during the strike and hundreds of former strikers were never rehired.

Since that time conditions have hardly improved. Under continuous pressure for cost cutting, management has held down wages and carried out continuous downsizing.

2015 saw the largest number of mergers in the newspaper industry since 2008 as companies sought to cut costs in order to survive in the face of competition from the Internet. The industry is dominated by a handful of giant corporations, such as Gannett, the owner of the *Detroit Free Press*. The *Free Press* and the *News* have already been through several rounds of recent cuts including home delivery cutbacks and staff reductions.

In 1989, the *Free Press*, then owned by Knight

Ridder, entered into a 100-year joint operating agreement with the *Detroit News*, then owned by Gannett. In 2005, Gannett announced it would sell the *News* to MediaNews Group and purchase the *Free Press* from Knight Ridder. With this move, Gannett became the managing partner in the papers' joint operating agreement.

In 2013, MediaNews Group—the owner of the *Detroit News*—and 21st Century Media merged to form Digital First Media. In 2015, Digital First Media was in advanced acquisition talks with private equity firm Apollo Global Management, but eventually backed out of the deal. The takeover would have put the future of the *Detroit News* in question, since the paper would not have been included in the takeover.

Kim Storeygard, a journalist with eight years at the *Detroit News*, said, “These are companies that were used to making 20 percent profit margins before the Internet. Both newspapers have been bought and sold essentially from one hedge fund to another.

“We’ve faced wage cuts and have seen no increase in our standard of living for 10 years. Starting salaries for journalists here are around \$28,000 to \$33,000, assuming you are full time. If you are an intern or a part-timer without the hours you get no benefits.

“Currently at the *Free Press* a part-timer has to work 20 hours or more a week to qualify for benefits. At the *News* it’s 25 hours or more. The *News* wants to raise this to 30 hours or more, which, as our lawyer said, is like working full time.

“What’s happening here is emblematic of what’s going on across the country. Journalism used to be a working-class career. All you needed was common sense and a desire to find the truth. But these characteristics aren’t valued anymore.”

Few of those currently working at the newspapers are veterans of the 1995-97 strike. Susan Hall has 29 years at the *Detroit Free Press* and is the oldest woman in the paper’s newsroom. “This situation is very familiar,” Susan said. “Twenty years ago we were walking picket lines and shouting against how unfair the companies were being. They have no reason for doing this—we are Pulitzer Prize-winning journalists.

“They don’t want to spend any money unless they can make more money from it. Management wants us to pay more for health care. They undervalue workers who have experience and know the beat. Now all they

are interested in is getting writers who can churn out stuff faster for the web. They do not value accuracy or depth of reporting, just speed.

“They’ve gotten rid of older journalists with buyouts and have brought in younger workers at entry level wages. If they get rid of seniority, as the oldest woman there, I’d be out of a job.”

Referring to the stand taken by autoworkers last fall when they rejected the first UAW-backed national contract in more than three decades, Susan said, “I was proud of them and I said keep going.”

Her coworker Sonya, who has 10 years at the *Free Press* and 15 years in the industry, said, “We want a fair contract because our wages have been frozen for more than a decade. Our standard of living is going backward. The out-of-pocket health care costs and the new parking fees we pay are essentially more pay cuts for us.

“They say the economy is booming but all you have to do is look at Flint and Detroit to see that it’s not.”

Jennifer added, “A lot of people don’t make enough money. We need regular raises for the hard work we are doing.”



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