

Billionaire CEO Joe Ricketts shuts down DNAinfo and Gothamist after unionization vote

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Billionaire Joe Ricketts, the owner of the local news focused websites DNAinfo and Gothamist, abruptly shut down their web presence and removed online access to their archives on Thursday, in evident retaliation for a recent successful unionization vote. However, the move should be viewed not just as an act of right-wing union busting but as an outright act of political censorship by Ricketts, who is heavily active as a supporter of the Republican Party, and whose \$2.1 billion net worth derives primarily from his role as founder of the financial brokerage firm TD Ameritrade.

DNAinfo and Gothamist, the latter of which had been acquired by Ricketts only in March, focused on local issues in New York City, Chicago, and other large American cities including Los Angeles, San Francisco and Washington, DC. By reporting primarily on local issues, their reporters often covered stories that larger news outlets did not, including stories about police brutality and municipal political corruption. Such information was popular enough to draw around 15 million site visits per month.

Last week, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) held a formal vote, in which 25 out of 27 newsroom employees in the New York office voted to join the Writers Guild of America East (WGA East). The NLRB vote was held after Ricketts refused to recognize the union after workers had agreed to the WGA East's unionization effort in April.

Ricketts, who epitomizes the outlook of the financial aristocracy, has been outspoken in his hostility to unions or to any encroachment on the rights of the bourgeoisie to trample on workers in any way they see fit. In an entirely self-serving September 12 blog post titled "Why I'm Against Unions at Businesses I Create," Ricketts wrote that "unions exert efforts that tend to destroy the Free

Enterprise system," and blamed them for destroying the supposed "esprit de corps" between ownership and labor.

According to a report in the *New York Times*, Ricketts told workers during the unionization effort, "As long as it's my money that's paying for everything, I intend to be the one making the decisions about the direction of the business." At around the same time, DNAinfo's COO sent an email threatening that unionization might be "the final straw that caused the business to close."

After Ricketts purchased Gothamist in March, co-founder Jake Dobkin began a campaign of dissuading his reporters from unionizing, insisting that Ricketts would close the company if they did. It is notable that after acquiring Gothamist, the site removed from its archives several articles critical of the Ricketts family.

In February, DNAinfo fired five of their more high-profile reporters including their Criminal Justice editor Murray Weiss, political reporter Jeff Mays and investigative reporter James Fanelli.

Workers at both websites were apparently blindsided by the decision to shut down operations, with reports indicating that reporters were filing stories in Chicago up until the point that all links to the sites were redirected to a letter from Ricketts explaining his reasons for the closure.

In the letter Ricketts cynically states, "... DNAinfo is, at the end of the day, a business, and businesses need to be economically successful if they are to endure. And while we made important progress toward building DNAinfo into a successful business, in the end, that progress hasn't been sufficient to support the tremendous effort and expense needed to produce the type of journalism on which the company was founded."

Ricketts' decision to cut off access to the site and its archives was seen as a particularly vindictive form of

retaliation against the now-fired journalists and editors, who are normally expected to provide examples of their work when applying to jobs. Since then, access to old articles has apparently been restored, though it is not clear if this will be permanent. A company spokesperson on Thursday said that details concerning preservation and archiving of site content would be addressed in the coming weeks.

With the closure of the sites, 115 journalists and staff members are now out of a job. According to the *Times*, they have been offered a paltry three months of “administrative leave” at full pay, and four weeks of severance pay.

In response to these sweeping attacks on journalists and the information they produced over the course of many years, the WGA East issued a characteristically tepid statement, making clear it would not mobilize its membership in defense of the fired journalists, instead working to dissipate popular outrage into futile legal appeals. “It is no secret that threats were made to these workers during the organizing drive,” the WGA East wrote. “The Guild will be looking at all of our potential areas of recourse and we will aggressively pursue our new members’ rights.”

Ricketts and his children, Todd, Laura, Pete and Tom have been extremely influential in national and state politics, funding Democrats and Republicans alike, spending millions of dollars influencing the 2016 US presidential election. Joe and his wife Marlene had initially opposed Trump during the 2016 Republican primaries and donated almost \$6 million to anti-Trump super PACs.

Drawing the candidate’s ire, Trump tweeted “I hear the Ricketts [sic] family, who own the Chicago Cubs, are secretly spending \$’s against me. They better be careful, they have a lot to hide!” As the race drew closer to the election Ricketts eventually donated \$1 million to a pro-Trump super PAC and had spent almost \$15 million on the election cycle.

In exchange for their support, Todd Ricketts was nominated by Trump as Deputy Secretary of Commerce. Eventually Todd withdrew his nomination to avoid scrutiny of his network of financial holdings. Todd has donated over \$209,000 to largely Republican causes including current Governor Bruce Rauner as well as to Chicago’s Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel.

Laura Ricketts was a fundraiser for Hillary Clinton’s campaign and has donated over \$440,000 to mainly Democratic candidates including current gubernatorial

candidate Daniel Biss, former Cook County State’s Attorney Anita Alvarez and former Governor Pat Quinn, and State Attorney General Lisa Madigan.

Pete Ricketts is the current Republican Governor of Nebraska.

Tom Ricketts was instrumental in the family’s successful bid to purchase the Chicago Cubs baseball team. Again, exemplifying the aristocratic principle, the family threatened to relocate the Cubs to the suburbs if the city stood in the way of their plans to remodel the stadium and redevelop large areas around the stadium.

Joe Ricketts’ decision to close the publications and block access to years of reporting should come as a dire warning to the working class. Democratic rights are being systematically and ever more dramatically chipped away. As social inequality grows to ever greater heights the capitalist aristocracy can no longer accept the right to a free press.

Along with the campaign being waged by Google and other internet companies to censor political opposition to the policies of the US government, which has already found expression in the blacklisting of the WSWS and other left-wing websites and journalists, even mainstream media sites are being reined in and shut down. Absent the independent political intervention of the working class, there is little stopping the billionaires and corporations that own news outlets and social media platforms from resorting to similar tactics.

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