

The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r

An independent weekly internet magazine
dedicated to the movement for economic justice,
social justice and peace - Providing commentary,
analysis and investigations on issues affecting
African Americans and the African world.

www.BlackCommentator.com

Oct 25, 2012 - Issue 491

In Newspaper Contract Talks, Persistence Pays Off Solidarity America By John Funciello BC Columnist

If there ever was an example of persistence, and there have been a few of them in the annals of labor, it has to be the reporters and workers at the *Dayton Daily News*, as their union reported that they have signed a contract after 26 years.

That's not a typo. They have worked without a contract for 26 years and were able to do so because a number of conditions of the old contract were adhered to by both the company and the union, The Newspaper Guild-Communications Workers of America.

Other newspaper contracts have been left open for years in the past, but this one appeared to be a record-setter. A one-year agreement was ratified in midsummer and the local celebrated its victory with champagne.

During the years, bargaining sessions were started, and then faded away. The company asked for concessions that it knew the Guild could not accept. And it went on that way, until the years piled up. - as the international level pointed out in the fall issue of *The Guild Reporter*, there was some structure to working under an expired contract, such as a grievance procedure, up to 46 weeks of severance pay, and seniority in layoffs.

Although the duration of the lack of a contract for the Dayton workers is unusual, it is not unusual for newspapers to work under an expired contract, with agreement by both sides that the terms and conditions

do not change for the period of continued negotiations. And, that's what they did in Dayton. In fact, the local grew somewhat in numbers during the past two decades and there are some workers who are at other properties of the company in the same area who are not unionized. The local promises not to rest until all those workers are under a union contract.

Hope for a new contract kept the members of the Dayton local together, but they attributed that to one main characteristic: solidarity. They took care of each other and continued to build the union and, through that, they learned well what it means to be united and a unified force in the workplace.

The union members did not strike and the employer, Cox Media Group, did not lock them out. There have been few lockouts of note in the newspaper business and the workers were not inclined to strike. Looking back over 26 years, at least one of the reasons the workers did not strike was that this was the time that the worst anti-union activity of the Reagan years was kicking into high gear. Those two terms of Reagan's presidency were the early years of the assault on workers that we see today among Right Wing politicians, particularly the Republicans, and Corporate America, in general.

Throughout this period, the U.S. economy was changing, and not for the better. It was a time when President Bill Clinton, ripping a page out of the Republican playbook, embraced "free trade" as one of his signature issues. The policy was anything but free for the workers of the nation, although it was free for every other element of the economy. Goods and manufacturing materiel flowed freely among the nations of the free trade partnerships. Money and financing flowed freely. Protection of corporate investments in foreign nations came in the form of World Bank and International Monetary Fund guarantees, the U.S. State Department geared up to help and even the military was available to do the bidding of Corporate America.

Workers could not move from one country to another. All they could do was watch, usually in silence, as their plants were moved to low-wage countries and, in many cases, even the machines they worked on were moved to new locations, in some other nation. All they could do was look on in silence.

Newspaper reporters and editors were certain that their jobs could not be moved elsewhere, because what they wrote about and reported on was happening right where their paper was located. How could anyone

cover local beats from a low-wage country? They did feel somewhat secure in that, at least for a time. Now, of course, we know that it is possible to farm out some of the work (at least, for local papers) to English-speaking persons, working at low wages, in some other country. India readily comes to mind.

It was the atmosphere in the U.S. that was affecting all workers. Since the firing of the air traffic controllers in 1981, even unionized workers were becoming more fearful of disrupting their working lives in any way, and that was the beginning of the decline of strikes in America. Strikes always have been the action of last resort on the part of union workers, but strikes have been made the highly charged aspect of unionization that the Right Wing has used to instill fear in the hearts and minds of non-union workers, those who most desperately need a union.

Employers in the U.S., after the destruction of the air traffic controllers union, became more and more aggressive in their suppression of workers' right to form unions, no matter that it was a right protected by federal law. The animus against workers and their unions has grown to this day, until the unexpected (for most people) assault against public workers in Wisconsin, Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, and other states. Even in states with high "union density," which are few, government officials went after the rights of their public workers. And, if the attacks were not overt, many politicians stood by and watched, as the more vicious among them went after concessions in pay, health care, and pensions, and after the right to collectively bargain, the heart of any union local.

This was the atmosphere in the U.S. during the years of struggle of the Dayton Daily News workers and, because it is not easy to replace so many skilled workers at one time, the paper did not want to risk locking them out.

As a result, the workers of the Dayton Guild local hung on, making do with what was left of their contract for 26 long years. Ultimately, they have been able to celebrate a new, signed contract and they look forward to negotiating contracts for the other workers in "news properties" that are owned by the same employer.

The message in all of this is that unity and solidarity are what count for workers, along with the support of other workers in unions who simply know that "an injury to one is an injury to all," and, by the same principle, when one group of workers wins, all workers win.

And the final message? Never give up!

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