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Newspapers need to cover labor as fairly as they cover themselves

BY MARV RUSSOW

Like many I was surprised by the Free Press announcement of home delivery cutbacks. But not that surprised. I pay close attention to stories about declines in newspaper circulation.

This trend has been of particular interest to me because I am a labor leader. Stories about readership decline often contain news of job losses. That's a subject about which labor leaders are very sensitive.

Beyond that, though, I have thought for a long time that newspapers report reductions in their own circulation and readership quite differently than they report declines in union membership. The Free Press announcement followed a pattern I have seen before. It was full of context. The Internet, changes in lifestyle, rising costs for newsprint and transportation, and other external forces were identified and explained in stories and columns that took up more than three full pages.

But context is exactly what's usually missing when newspapers talk about the decline in union membership. This past Labor Day, I saved examples of the typical stories about falling union membership. Sure enough, there were lots of predictable headlines such as "Labor Unions on the decline" (The Wichita Eagle). A Google search turned up a campus newspaper article titled: "Labor pains --Though unions may have been necessary a long time ago, they now do more harm than good to American prosperity."

Exactly my point. When it comes to union decline, the wounds usually are portrayed as self-inflicted. Unions are harmful to the economy, corrupt, slow to change, fighting among themselves, etc. Sometimes lip service is paid to big economic shifts that are eliminating jobs held by union workers. But it's extremely rare to see background on the vicious union-busting tactics used by employers, or the weakness of the laws that protect the right of workers to organize, or the relentless hostility of the Bush administration to unions, let alone the union-busting efforts that many newspapers have carried out against their own workers.

Now don't get me wrong. Some union wounds are self-inflicted. We have been slow to adapt to dramatic changes in the economic, social and political environment. But that's been true of newspapers, too.

It's almost never reported here, but unlike in the United States, newspaper circulation in Europe is quite healthy. Why? Papers there have better adapted to the growth of the Web and other so-called game-changing trends. I applaud the Free Press for trying to make just such adjustments. I appreciate the declared intention to negotiate the details with the unions that represent Free Press workers. I hope the changes produce the desired results.

Surprisingly to many I am sure, the unions' experience may offer some encouragement. Unlike

newspaper circulation, net membership in unions went up by more than 300,000 last year. Unions are adapting. We are reworking our relationships with our members, our employers and with nonunion workers. We are taking new approaches to collective bargaining, political action, community involvement and organizing.

Do last year's growth numbers mean that we have turned the corner once and for all? It's too soon to tell. But what is certain is that we are working harder than ever to become the organizations that workers need in the global economy of the 21st Century. And, yes, we are optimistic that President-elect Barack Obama's administration will be more fair when it comes to resolving disputes between workers and employers over union organizing and collective bargaining.

So, in the spirit of this time of change, here's an invitation to journalists from any news media. Call me. I've got some news for you about things we are doing differently at our local union.

Here's one final thought. I like newspapers. I read newspapers. I agree that they are essential to our democracy. Newspapers provide high quality content that you just don't get from TV or radio.

So, how about a truce? As a union leader, I'll defend the value of newspapers and urge my colleagues to do likewise. Newspapers can report more frequently and more fairly about unions.

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