

Labour Mags

Vivienne Muhling

In this age of electronic media, we are nonetheless bombarded by the written word. Special interest newspapers and magazines are proliferating, and most of our labour unions have

Some unions opt for tabloid size newspapers that can be stuffed into a pocket to read at lunch break; some have simple weekly newsletters, plus polished monthly, bi-monthly or quarterly publications. All aim to balance the impact of the

Recent issues of *Solidarité* and *National Union*: two slick examples of the new face of labour union magazines.



graduated from modest newsletters to magazines with full colour covers and catchy headlines in a bid to compete for the small percentage of time devoted to reading. Labour movement literature is generally mailed directly to the homes of union members. Some public access libraries receive a modicum of copies, but there is very little available at the Toronto Metropolitan Library. I did find a fair selection at the University of Toronto's Centre for Industrial Relations, but not sufficient for the purposes of this article.

management-oriented daily press. "The people who sit across the bargaining table from the workers are often the same people who own the media," says Catherine MacLeod in the *National Union Magazine*, Canadian Auto Worker's award-winning publication. "Those in power have the ability to shape, direct and exploit the perception... That's why workers need their own media." The following observations are based on a limited survey. It includes publications by twelve

unions, two provincial Canadian Labour Councils, *Labour*, and *Our Times* independent magazine. sample demonstrated that the union's contribution standards is due to the Canadian Association of 160-member national skill-building works service items and grants presents annual awards all papers that look like CALM bug on the market. Among the non-union value per dollar in the Alberta Federation *The Activist*. It carries advertising ten-dollar per more pages are taken donations to the Workers Publishing actual dollars professional fund-raising parties ify businesses and industry to know how much they to shame other donors butions than they have order to match or beat competitors. The Workers under the charity that be "twisted" to support the is therefore embarrassed emulating one of the unions that solicit funds to achieve social status. Who are the rank-and-file labour publications? people still seem to be blue collars, disinterested in cultural activities beyond sports. In reality, they be blue, tie-died white neck. In many unions, the gamut from less than university degrees. individual publications effectively with the union ship. They are aided whatever their collar noted, "gradually thinking...become publishers of labour literature. However, I do not know researched how many more than a cursory glance. Free trade was the labour's current issue who were not getting and consider Canada stand are those who unions—unless the publication *Canadian*

unions, two provincial federations, an issue of the Canadian Labour Congress' bilingual *Canadian Labour*, and *Our Times*, a labour-oriented independent magazine. The fact that most of the sample demonstrated high literacy and production standards is due in no small measure to the Canadian Association of Labour Media. This is a 160-member national organization which offers skill-building workshops, camera-ready news service items and graphic services. CALM also presents annual awards for excellence. Almost all papers that look good and read well bear the CALM bug on the masthead.

Among the non-CALM papers, the poorest value per dollar in the sample would seem to be the Alberta Federation of Labour's eight-page *The Activist*. It carries a one-third page ad soliciting ten-dollar per year subscriptions. Three more pages are taken up by acknowledgements of donations to the Workers' Health Centre, noting actual contribution figures beside each name. Publishing actual donation amounts is a professional fund-raising ploy, frequently used to gratify businesses and individuals who want society to know how much they can afford to donate, and to shame other donors into making larger contributions than they have initially volunteered, in order to match or better their business or social competitors. The Workers' Health Centre is undeniably a worthy labour cause, but so are most of the charities that business executives are "arm-twisted" to support more liberally. This outsider is therefore embarrassed to find a labour paper emulating one of the tactics used by organizations that solicit funds from people who wish to achieve social status through financial largess.

Who are the rank and file workers to whom labour publications are addressed? Far too many people still seem to think of them as stereotypical blue collars, disinterested in any social or cultural activities beyond beer-drinking and spectator sports. In reality, their workaday collars can be blue, tie-died white, pink or academic turtle-neck. In many unions, educational levels run the gamut from less than grade school to multiple university degrees. Within the mandates of their individual publications, most labour editors deal effectively with the challenge of diverse readership. They are aided by the fact that unionists, whatever their collar colour, as one union rep noted, "gradually absorb certain ways of thinking...become part of the union culture." The editors of labour literature generally come from within this informal working-class culture. However, I do not know whether anyone has ever researched how many union members give more than a cursory glance to their trade papers.

Free trade was the burning topic for most of labour's current issues. The only union members who were not getting ample opportunity to read and consider Canadian labour's anti-free trade stand are those who belong to locals of American unions—unless they read the CLC's excellent publication *Canadian Labour*, or a provincial

magazine with the qualities of the Ontario Federation of Labour's *Ontario Labour*. The Hotel and Restaurant Employees International magazine, *Catering Industry Employee*, for example, has only one page of Canadian news, with a French translation overleaf. Even on this page, there is barely a mention of the free trade pact in any of their recent issues.

The *Sheet Metal Worker's Journal*, also an American union publication, does give excellent recognition to its Canadian locals. It talks about "two independent nations, one independent union," or, as SMWIA sometimes puts it, "Two Flags! One Union!" In preparation for an international business agents meeting in Ottawa, their August 1987 issue was devoted almost entirely to Canada, but it nevertheless downplayed Canadian labour's concern over the free trade agreement. The only reference was in an article about the Canadian Federation of Labour which, it said, "has been a major player in the national debate concerning international trade and specifically a new trading agreement with the United States...(and) a leader in voicing labour's concerns with regard to trade issues." Does that tell American labour or Canadian members of the SMWIA that the Canadian labour movement is a leader in the fight to thwart the free trade pact? I hardly think so.

Conversely, I discovered one of the most concise and convincing anti-free trade articles in the March/April edition of *Steelabour*. This magazine, which bears the subtitle "Voice of the United Steelworkers of America," received an award for general editorial excellence at the International Labour Communications Association Conference last year. It is published in Canada, and available to all United Steel Workers Canadian locals. In his foreword to the March/April 1988 edition, the National Director for Canada, Gerard Docquier, states that the Steelworkers have studied the free trade accord in detail and consider it dangerous to Canada's independence. Further on, Hugh Mackenzie's two-page illustrated article is both factual and easy to follow.

By contrast, CAW's *National Union Magazine's* Winter 87/88 article is dry and demanding to follow, despite an attractive layout. The back cover ad, however, calling for an election mandate before the free trade deal is ratified, is to the point and effective. Many of the magazines examined carried similar ads decrying the free trade deal.

CUPE, the Canadian Union of Public Employees, is a prolific publisher. *The Leader* is a tabloid newspaper, with good layout, but marred by unjustified right-hand margins. It is distributed within a bi-monthly titled *The Facts* which has cartoons that I consider to be over-simplified and poorly executed and has, again, unjustified right-hand margins. It is also shipped within their impressive glossy quarterly, *The Public Employee*. Of all the varied labour approaches to the

free trade proposition examined in the sample, I found *The Public Employee's* Summer, 1987 presentation to be by far the most persuasive. The full-colour cover depicts one arm of a brass weigh scale, suspended by chains that bleed off the page. In the scale arm are doll-like depictions of the many varied workers CUPE represents; below, boldly yellow on blue, is the title of the leading article: *Defending Fairness*. Open to the centrespread and the brass scale dominates, the worker—full arm beautifully balanced by the other arm, which contains one enormous maple leaf; below it, an excerpt from a speech by CUPE National President, Jeff Rose.

This two-page excerpt spells out the historic landmarks of Canada's efforts to achieve a caring and sharing society, argues the importance of many of these efforts to his readers, both as citizens and as unionists, and states that there are powerful forces trying to change our traditions, forces that don't accept the legitimacy of the people's involvement, through government, in determining social and economic priorities. Only towards the end of the excerpt does he use the words "free trade." By then, he has built a substantial argument for defending the quality of Canadian life that he believes to be threatened by potential americanization.

The Jeff Rose approach, stressing the positive, was a welcome alternative to the plethora of articles headed *The Free Trade Threat* or *The Free Trade Charade*. It was clearly written, required no great effort of mind to comprehend, and yet showed respect for the reader's intelligence and powers of deduction. *Defending Fairness* is a soft-sell call to action that appeals to both the heart and to the mind. Bravo, CUPE!

On the whole, I believe that most of the publications in the sample have high production and editorial standards. By and large, there is a good balance between specific work and personality topics and the larger social issues of such matters as politics, environment, health and safety. Over the past two years, commentary on the free trade pact has become more and more dominant. But, as D'Arcy Martin, CWC's national education representative wrote in *Our Times*:

The labour movement is caught between a rock and a hard place when addressing broad social issues...unionism isn't just a social tool nor just a guild... Its culture goes far beyond the narrow demands of a mere self-interest group...(it) is the organizational core of the social resistance in Canada.

Our Times is the only independent journal in the sample. Published by a cooperative, it features writers from within the labour movement. It is Canada's only overview of labour thought, action and attitude that is regularly available to the general public by subscription and on newsstands.

Vivienne Muhling is a freelance writer and a regular contributor to the Canadian Jewish News.