Re-Constructing Labour
at The Globe and Mail

D'Arcy Martin

For nearly 40 years "Canada's national newspaper" had a full-time reporter assigned to covering the labour movement. Last spring senior management shifted the assignment to become a "workplace" beat. And thereby hangs a tale.

In August Lorne Slotnick spoke to Borderlines about this shift in media construction of unionism. Until April 1989 Lorne was the Globe's labour reporter. He was interviewed by union educator D'Arcy Martin, who works with the Communications and Electrical Workers of Canada (C.W.C.).
D'Arcy Martin: What brought you into labour journalism?

Lorne Slotnick: I came to The Globe and Mail in 1979, fresh out of Bar Admission Course. Towards the end of my legal studies I decided not to practise law but to see if there were jobs in newspapers.

The Globe was my favourite newspaper, because there wasn't much puffery in it. From reading it, I knew people there took journalism seriously, and thought serving readers meant presenting information. It seemed that accuracy was valued there, that precise use of facts meant something.

Besides, I'm a news nut, and wanted to be at the centre of that action. There's a newsroom culture, even if it's fading a bit, and I felt I belonged there. Maybe it was all those movies set in newsrooms that hooked me.

Anyway, I was hired as copy editor and worked at that for three years. That meant writing headlines, checking grammar, fixing stories up. In early 1982 I started writing as a general assignment reporter. In November 1984 I started covering labour. In April 1989 I went back to general assignment reporter.

How were unions portrayed at the Globe in the past?

The labour beat at the Globe, and to a large extent in Canada, was defined by Will List, who covered labour for 34 years there. In Will's time collective bargaining was important, and merited informed coverage.

It was a really sensitive beat, but I didn't find that. In my experience, senior editors felt they didn't understand labour and were pleased to have someone who did. At many papers, they give the police beat to people who think and act and empathise with cops. That's because they know that police won't talk much, and certainly not to people they don't trust.

The editors knew I was active in the Newspaper Guild and generally pro-labour. They knew unionists aren't like politicians, who will talk to anyone. So it made sense to assign someone that unionists would trust.

Labour reporting is event-driven, especially in major strikes. These come up practically every year, and you need someone who understands the background. It shows in poor quality, if the reporter doesn't understand COLA clauses and grievance procedures, and has no feel for the personal stories involved.

The Globe has taken pride in having informed beat reporters. Many readers don't read bylines except for columns. But opinion leaders in each sector read bylines for change they make, and that is what the Globe caters to.

In fact, I was surprised at how many union officials read the Globe. Mostly, it's the business section they read, to monitor their sector. Only in some unions with highly educated members, like P.S.A.C., did I find many members who read the Globe.

How were you perceived and received by union leaders?

I'll tell you what I'd like to believe... that I was independent and trustworthy, and I had good things in unions, I didn't hesitate to say so.

After I was moved off the beat, I got a lot of supportive calls from unionists. They felt I'd done a great job. That was really important for me.

Some labour leaders, I think, saw me as too far to the left. I would give voice to dissidents, and report internal debates on issues like nationalism. Remember that I was intern at the CBC, and never had to fill a story. I respected that, and when I was asked to, I did it.

What word is added to almost everything?

May be the most important.

On a side note, a Seven Days against Racism image.

But if you give conjurers things, you get conjurers.

Another word is used, a "repeal" thought. The Globe is at time, a place in time, a place.

And I'm not sure if the union leaders are happy with me.

Many of the unions I covered have decades of history behind them, and I was a young journalist. Maybe they thought I was too much of an enfant terrible, a young journalist.

Occasionally you ask yourself if you're really making a difference.

Labour writers can do that.

Traditionally you're paid to write, not to make a difference, but in the 70s and 80s we tried to.

A lot of us thought of ourselves as independent journalists. We tried to make a difference.

The mainstream media was too much in service to business, and too much in service to government. We tried to change that.

That was the main thrust of our work, to change the mainstream media, to make it more independant.

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may be more important in influencing most readers.

One heavily loaded word is "concessions." Several unions have made a lot of noise about concessions. It's part of their public image to crusade against concessions.

But even the auto workers have had to give concessions. It's a fact of union life. Had I said the union gave up on something, that was fine, but if I said it gave a concession, that was an attack.

Another word that raises temperatures is "replacement workers," a.k.a. "scabs." I think neither term is appropriate for the Globe, so I used the term "strike-breakers" at times like the 1987 postal strikes. A few times this was changed by editors to "replacement workers," and by the end there may have been a pangs of doing this.

Another term that rings bells is "demands," as in "union demands." Many union people feel it makes unions sound harsh and greedy. It even implies the use of force. But "proposals" is too milquetoast for the reality, and since unions often call them "demands" internally, I used the noun occasionally. But I stayed away from the verb. I never used the phrase "the union demands," because I felt that unions actually "seek" things.

Management does have the power to enforce, and so I sometimes used the phrase "management demands," just to turn the tables.

Occasionally an editor would put the phrase "union boss" in a headline, but I never used the phrase myself. Actually, I protested whenever the term showed up.

Language, of course, produces emotions. That is highlighted in controversial issues like abortion and to a lesser degree it's true in labour. On an issue like "strike-breakers" there is no word you can use that everyone will like.

How did the climate at the Globe shift during your years on the labour beat?

Traditionally, the newsroom at the Globe was independent — of advertising, of the editorial page, of the publisher's views. People who worked in the newsroom basically didn't have to look over their shoulder.

A story was a story. That made the Globe a good place to work, and attracted good journalists.

The publisher, Roy Megarry, had made many changes in circulation, advertising and so on, but had never touched the newsroom. Not until 1988.

Early that year, Mick Lowe, a freelance In Sudbury, was cut off by Megarry after some articles critical of Inco. Things came to a head in the summer and fall of 1988, during the free trade debate and the election. It became clear, through direct and subtle signals, that the news coverage in the paper was going to favour free trade.

Some stories were highlighted, and others buried. That's how the signals work. The paper took a strong editorial stance in favour of free trade, which didn't matter much normally, but this time it extended to encouraging favourable coverage of free trade.

It's a weird process, but in any organisation you know what's good for you. The hierarchy moves and the ambitious start to move with them. They can see what angle to take if you want to get ahead.

So on free trade, the Star was as biased on the opposite side. But at least they were explicit about it. At the Globe, there had been a mythology that news is news. Ultimately, every news judgment is a political judgment, but there had been more room at the Globe than at most papers, enabling a wider range of stories to find a place in the paper.

How did this shift in the political wind affect the labour beat? Affect you?

After the free trade election, in January 1989, the publisher made his big move on the newsroom. He cleared out the two top managers, and replaced them with people he felt were more "authoritative" in his eyes, with him. From there, other changes tumbled down the hierarchy.

From the fact of their predecessors, the new management have learned a lesson: they don't challenge the publisher. The paper has become a dictatorship. The two senior managers, Tim Pritchard and William Thosell, cater to Megarry's vision of the paper, which is quite wide-ranging. It encompasses distribution, trend coverage and so on.

This had direct implications for labour coverage.

When the former managing editor Geoffrey Stevens was fired, he talked openly about his disagreements with Megarry. In the list of issues was Megarry's desire to abolish the labour beat. That was my first indication of what was to come.

In March a restructured list of beats was posted. There was no labour beat listed, but a workplace beat. After a few weeks, I asked Tim Pritchard, the managing editor, what this shift meant. I observed that we needed broader coverage of labour, dealing with issues like pay equity and workers' compensation, and that maybe a second reporter was needed. But he explained the need for more upbeat news, less confrontation.

I wanted more examples of where workers and managers are getting along. That's pure ideology, of course. I observed that it would be like reporting airplanes that took off and landed safely. It's not news.

I tried to do a couple of stories along these lines. Then I was called into the manager's office for a very testy conversation, where he said "we don't want more stories about organised labour."

At that point, in mid-April, I withdrew from the new "broader" workplace beat. I thought the equivalent would be to "broaden" the coverage of Parliament by dropping all coverage of the Opposition given that labour functions as the opposition in our economy.

Once I protested publicly, the management began to backtrack. Nobody from inside would take the workplace beat, because of its associations. In the end Jane Coutts was hired from outside, and she is not a pushover, who will pander to the prevailing political wind there. So far they have left her alone, and they have posted the beat as "labour/workplace."

Since April I've been working as a general assignment reporter and have increased my union activity in the southern Ontario local of the Newspaper Guild (SONG).

What are the implications of your experiences?

In my view, Megarry and his new editor-in-chief, William Thosell, are very modern business thinkers. They support free trade philosophically, not just for personal gain.

Free trade is part of a bigger package in modern business thinking, which includes technological innovation. In this package, unions don't fit. They are outdated, no longer significant actors in the economy.

In part, this is because the unions are in sectors that "won't be missed" in the future. In a newspaper that is modern, a labour beat just doesn't belong.

The goal is to make our country do better in the global competitive economy, and workers have the same stake as managers in this goal.

The old labour beat, developed by Wilf Eist, worked on a different set of assumptions.

What would a "modern" labour beat be, in your view?

Some of the old things still matter. Unions make news in collective bargaining, when they gain indexed pensions, and when they undertake campaigns that matter, like the unsuccessful C.W.C. clerical organizing drive at Bell Canada. Union politics, links to the N.D.P., and policy declarations matter, because unions are important institutions.

But there's another ground that should be covered. I think occupational health and safety, the politics of the body, needs better coverage. Pay equity and gender politics need more attention. Human rights issues are union issues too, but they don't get covered that way. It's hard when a paper like ours has one labour reporter and 30 business reporters.

These are some examples that I proposed. But in the current climate, the labour voice on these issues won't be "newseworthy."

What happens next?

It's not clear. The current regime at the Globe has backed off considerably, but they do not accept that unions really have a place in the "modern" economy or the "modern" media. To some extent their new initiatives are focused on internal inertia and the reaction of constituencies like the labour movement. They may wind up with the same old paper, except that they've killed the spirit.

Their effort to have a "management" beat put in place of the labour beat seems to be on hold for the time being. I can't predict what will happen next.
The Hamilton Spectator

A NATIVE FIRST

The North American education system has been “infected with decontextualized, disembodied, irrelevant exercises” that teach children to fake understanding and to seek approval rather than knowledge or challenge.