

SHIFTING



WINDS

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 *Border/lines* 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.).

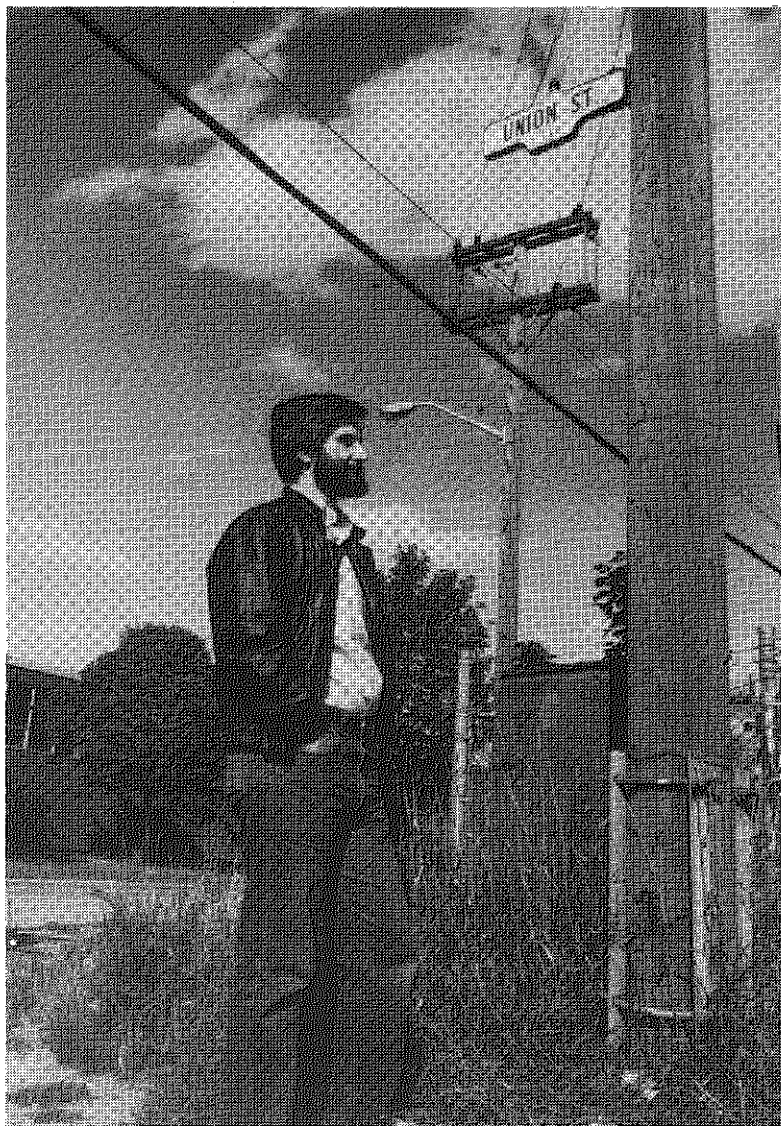


Photo of Lorne Slotnick
by D'Arcy Martin

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 Wilf List, who covered labour for 34 years there.

In Wilf's time collective bargaining was important, and merited informed coverage.

There was a place too for reporting on union politics, because unions were seen as significant institutions whose internal processes had an economic impact. There was no assumption that unions were good, but their inner workings and public declarations of policy were newsworthy. An informed readership had to know what unions thought. Or at least what union leaders thought.

Essentially, the *Globe* talks to spokespeople and officials of institutions. The people affected by stories rarely appear in the paper. Last week there was a feature on memories of the world wars, based on interviews in a Legion hall. It stood out because normally the *Globe* covers elites. Sometimes that's boring, but every country has a paper like that, and Canada's is the *Globe*.

Let's say two calls came in: a welfare mother was being cut off, and the Social Planning Council was releasing a report on welfare. The first story might appeal more to the *Star*, the second to the *Globe*.

Similarly, for the *Globe*, a worker cut off workers' compensation isn't news, but a change in W.C.B. policy might be. That is still true. It meant that to cover labour for the *Globe* meant becoming institutionalised. I think these stories were valid, and needed to be handled in a fair and accurate way.

During the ten years I've been there, the *Globe* has also gone national. Today, 40 percent of its readership is outside Ontario. A large strike in Toronto is news for the *Star*, while it would have to touch a wider issue to get real coverage at the *Globe*.

How was this stance communicated to you when you took over the labour beat?

I knew that I could write anything I wanted within that frame. Of course, I had to be accurate, basing my story on fact, not rumour. I had to contact all sides of a story. Also, I had to avoid being "slanted." The *Globe* rarely adopts an overt advocacy position on an issue.

Of course there were limits. During a postal strike, I had to cover the strike, not be off on a feature on some small plant in North York. But nobody had to tell me that and usually nobody did. Day-by-day, I did what I wanted. My major limit was that I was alone covering labour, and during a big running story like a postal strike I couldn't cover anything else.

It's not as if someone told me to cover Bob White or Gerard Docquier. My assessment of what was news, and how to approach it, was accepted. At the *Globe*, they put you on a beat and leave you alone unless you screw up. Almost any time I proposed a trip, it was approved. And almost never was a story squashed. But that's mainly because I knew what "*Globe* stories" were.

Labour was just part of the routine like education or the environment or Queen's Park or any other beat.

How is labour different as a beat?

A lot of people outside the paper assumed

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 personalities 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 their beat, and that is who 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 but trustworthy. Independent in that I wasn't in anyone's pocket. That's my concept of journalism anyway — bullshit is bullshit no matter where it's coming from. My opinions and sympathies don't reduce that critical distance.

I was sympathetic, but not naïve about the politics in the movement. Let's face it, there is incompetence, stupidity and even corruption 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 to quote or even mention the Confederation of Canadian Unions (C.C.U.) will drive some labour leaders nuts. It means giving them credibility, and that marks you. I tried not to let that cloud my judgment, but you are always sensitive to the pressure.

What words and names are ideologically charged in the union culture?

Jean-Claude Parrot is a charged name. Just by dropping him, you give him credibility, and irritate some other union leaders. But the choice of words is more subtle, and

may be more important in influencing most readers.

One heavily loaded word is "concessions." Several unions have made a lot of noise against 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 they 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 practice 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's 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 freelancer 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.

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 who saw more eye-to-eye 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 Thorsell, 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. He 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 Thorsell, 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're outmoded, no longer significant actors in the economy.

In part, this is because the unions are in sectors that "won't matter" 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 List, 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 organising drive at Bell Canada. Union politics, links to the N.D.P., and policy declarations matter, because unions are important institutions.

But there's other 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 "newsworthy."

What happens next?

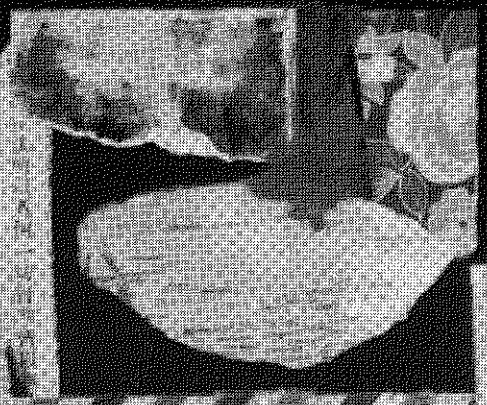
It's not clear. The current regime at the *Globe* has backed off considerably, but they do not accept that unions really have a place in the "modern" economy or the "modern" media. To some extent their new initiatives are foundering on internal inertia and the reaction of constituencies like the labour 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.

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Woman Chief resigns with no regrets



Native woman
artist leading
U of A students

Indians
landmark
rights st.

Artist's work chosen by U



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.



JANE ASH POITRAS

