

# Strike & Sabotage at *Wash. Post*

anon.

1975

If the publishing of a sympathetic account of a union struggle seems inconsistent with our perspective, which views unions as auxiliary organs of Capital, let us clarify the matter. As people who have spent our adult lives as wage workers and members of several different trade unions, we have always supported the struggles of our fellow workers to improve their lot within Capital. What we are adamant about is that union struggles have absolutely nothing to do with the revolutionary struggle for a communist society.

However, this strike is of particular interest to us because it magnifies the smaller types of resistance and sabotage all of us have exercised at our jobs. Also, the image of the *Washington Post* as a “liberal” bourgeois organ is shattered by their anti-worker stance and we are left with reactionary columnists like James Reston and William Buckley moaning about the destruction of “freedom of the press.”

(Staff note: Much of the following information comes from two *Washington Post* strikers who wish to remain anonymous.)

New York (LNS) — In one of the most militant job actions in recent years, nearly one hundred press operators for the *Washington Post* sabotaged and destroyed every piece of press machinery in the *Post* building, moments before going out on strike at 5:00 A.M. on October 1. Since then, over 1500 *Post* workers have been on strike over the newspaper's refusal to bargain on key issues in a new contract.

In the two weeks following the sabotage, the newspaper has continued a skeleton publication with strike breakers specially trained by the *Post* in preparation for the strike. The *Post* has also obtained a court injunction limiting the picketing by press operators, and has persuaded most of their reporters to cross the picket line.

In addition, the newspaper is cooperating with U.S. attorney Earl Silbert in bringing felony charges against the saboteurs and has vowed never to rehire anybody who took part in the October 1 sabotage.

These factors, coupled with strong anti-union statements by the *Post* management, and union charges that the *Post* is out to break the several unions involved, has led to what one observer described as “the most bitter newspaper strike in recent history.”

## **Workers Destroy the Presses**

In the months preceding the October 1 contract expiration, the *Washington Post* indicated that it would take a “hard line” on work rules known as “manning clauses.” These concessions, which the union won after many years of struggle, require the company to pay a full shift's wages to printers who report for work, but who may have to be idle once the presses start running.

“The *Post* wants to create a pool of a hundred or so people who won't know from one week to the next whether they'll be any work for them. The *Post* decided ‘This is going to be a business and we're going to put the unions in their place.’

“They were saying all the way up until October first, in essence ‘Ain't nothing we'd like better than a strike.’ We knew they had people trained to take over the jobs and they proved they could do it in 1973.

“I talked to one pressman after the (sabotage) incident and he said they expected to be locked out after they got off that night and not be allowed back in the building., that they'd be replaced by scab labor.

"The pressman said, okay, you've said you'll publish without us, and we're saying we'll do what we can to see that you don't." The company broke off negotiations around midnight, but the unions decided to keep working the shift.

"All of a sudden around 5 o'clock the fire alarms go off. We looked outside and saw the picketlines set up so we (typesetters) thought ah-ha, they (the *Post*) have set up a smoke fire to get us out of the building so we wouldn't come back in. There's paper fires at the *Post* all the time, anyway. When we got outside, we heard that they'd done in the presses."

Each of the *Post's* 72 press units was destroyed in the action. Giant ton and a half paper spools and trash cans were thrown into the running presses. Delicate parts were intentionally destroyed and press locking mechanisms turned on while the press was in full run, destroying gears and making unlocking the machinery next to impossible.

"Everybody knows the machine they work on and knows exactly how to destroy it," the typesetter continued. Damage was estimated in the millions, and an insurance investigator said, "I've never seen so much damage in my life."

The *Post* described the sabotage as "wanton vandalism" but admitted that it appeared to be "preplanned and synchronized." "It would be impossible for those kinds of damage to be done in that short a time without a plan, without assigned tasks, and without people who knew precisely what they were doing," a *Post* spokesperson said.

### **Workers Locked Out, Replaced by Scabs**

Only hours after the October 1 incident, the *Post* confirmed the union's fears by "furloughing" (another word for lock-out) their printers, typesetters, and other press craft union members. Picket lines were established immediately and a major scuffle broke out when one person crossing the picket line punched a picketeer.

"It was mid-afternoon and these people with funny little suitcases show up," recalled one person present on the picketline October 1 when the incident occurred. "One of the picketers yelled, 'There's a strikebreaker,' and World War III started when the strikebreaker slugged a picketer. The police started hauling people away and took one of the strikebreakers across the street when his suitcase fell apart and out popped a gun in a holster."

"At first he said 'I ain't never seen that before,' but a few minutes later, we learned they were from a West Virginia security agency and hired to be 'rent-a-cops' during the strike. Right there they decided the action was too hot and decided to leave town. They told us the *Post* told them it might be a six month job."

The following day the *Post* obtained a court injunction limiting the press operators to three picketers per entrance, but other craft unions have not been enjoined, and have been picketing in the hundreds each day since the strike.

The *Post*, after trying for two days to get union machinists to come in and repair the presses, "reluctantly" brought in non-union machinists on October 3. Also on October 3, the *Post* resumed publication in 24-page editions, by flying the unwieldy plates for each page from the *Post's* rooftop by helicopter to five non-union presses in the surrounding area.

The *Post* refused to disclose the names of the cooperating presses in order to "protect" (the presses) from the same kind of sabotage destruction and violence—which beset the *Post*." It was later revealed, however, that one of the cooperating presses was the Winchester (Va.) *Star*, an ultra-conservative evening newspaper owned by U.S. Senator Harry F. Byrd.

In an October 11 news conference, the *Post* management admitted that for two years they had been working on a "contingency plan" in preparation for the strike. The plan included training executive personnel and outsiders in various facets of press production, and the use of a recent technological device which enables the paper to be typeset and laid out by computers.

Scores of non-union *Post* employees were trained at a special school established by 200 newspapers to create a pool of trained personnel to break strikes, the *Post* admitted. It has since been learned that the training center is the Newspaper Production Research Center, located in Oklahoma City.

"Several years ago, the *Post* made a conscious decision that, if we were to have parity at the bargaining table, we were going to have to have the ability to publish (during a strike)," Mark Meagher, an executive vice-president of the *Post* said.

"Obviously this training was done secretly because we wanted to protect our people." Meagher also indicated that several other union newspapers may follow the *Post* strategy when their union contracts expire.

As of October 13, the *Post* reported that four of the major presses were repaired and that they were able to print a 24-page edition using *Post* presses. However, one of the presses worth millions of dollars was declared completely unsalvageable.

**Post Reporters Break the Strike**

Perhaps the most bitter feelings in the strike are between the blue collar craft union members and those white collar Newspaper Guild members who decided to cross the picketlines. About 500 Guild members, mostly secretaries, service personnel and low paid office personnel, are honoring the picketlines, but 300 other Guild members, mostly reporters and advertising personnel, have voted to cross the picket-lines.

“All the big name reporters—Carl Bernstein, Bob Woodward, Sally Quinn—are with the management on this one,” one source attending the Guild meetings said. “These people are making a good living and identify both editorially and economically with the paper. The lunchroom cafeteria workers making \$100 a week don’t concern them.”

# fifth Estate

anon.

Strike & Sabotage at *Wash. Post*

1975

<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/267-november-1975/strike-sabotage-wash-post>  
Fifth Estate #267, November, 1975

**[fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fiftheestate.org)**