

The News Gets Ready

John Watson

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The author is editor-in-chief of Wayne University's *South End* newspaper, former editor of the *Inner City Voice* and is an employee of the *Detroit News*.

Within the last four months, the management of the *Detroit News* has turned the *News* printing plant, located on the corner of Third and Lafayette, into a fortress.

Windows have been bricked up or covered with corrugated steel. Parking lots for *News* vehicles have been enclosed with cyclone fences topped with barbed wire.

News employees are required to carry identification cards, and to show them to the watchmen before entering the building.

The excuse *News* executives have given for their extraordinary security measures is that crime on the streets has become so dangerous as to require heavy fortification for *News* property and employees.

But the real reason the *News* is fortifying itself is that there is a good possibility that there will be another strike at the paper before the end of the current three year contract with the unions; and if there is a strike, the newspaper intends to publish anyway, hire scab labor, and break the resistance of the union to complete managerial control of production.

In the event that the *News* does attempt to break another paper strike, violence and bloodshed will be an inevitable byproduct. The new fortifications are not designed to protect *News* employees from street crime, but to protect *News* property from striking employees.

Events over the last four months also, indicate that the management of the *Detroit News* is actually attempting to precipitate a strike before the end of the contract so that the unions can be accused of wildcatting.

Detroit is known as a "union town." Even today, attempts to destroy unions as the legitimate representative of workingmen is looked upon unkindly by the hundreds of thousands of union members—black and white—who live in this area. An attack on one union is generally considered an attack on all unions.

Such an attempt would divide the community into two huge camps, one pro-union, the other anti, and the struggle between those two sides could easily lead to an unprecedented violent struggle in the streets of Detroit.

But it is precisely because of Detroit's reputation as a union town that the *Detroit News* may precipitate a strike and try to break the unions. It is suspected that the *News* enjoys the support of most of the newspaper publishers in the nation.

In the event of a long strike, or a great drop in circulation because of a union called boycott, the *News* can expect to receive financial support from other publishers. The reason is that the publishers believe that if the unions can be broken at the newspaper of a strong union city like Detroit, then unions can be broken anywhere in the country.

The newspaper industry has already made great roads into the process of breaking up unions. In Toronto, Miami, and Los Angeles Herald-Examiner, the process of fortification and I.D. cards was the same as is being followed by the *Detroit News*.

Another thought is that if unions are broken in the newspaper industry, they can be broken in most other industries.

That the *News* intends to publish even in the event of a strike was made clear when the newspaper resumed publication last August after a nine month strike. The *News* stated editorially that it was fed up with strikes and would print and distribute its paper without union help, if necessary. During the strike the *News* trained non-union personnel to run the presses.

They actually printed experimental editions, loaded trucks, and at one point actually drove a truck loaded with papers through the union lines and around the block. There is, therefore, no doubt that the *News* can run the presses in the event of a strike.

After the settlement of the last strike, working conditions did not improve inside the plant. Most employees feel that management-employee relations have deteriorated to a level below that of November 1967, when the strike was first called. Management took a new hard line, openly violated union contracts, and imposed new work standards on salaried personnel.

In the transportation division of the circulation department, drastic changes were made. The company hired a new man to run the department. Under his rule, drivers and jumpers have been subjected to unilateral changes in work standards, shift scheduling, and job bidding procedures. Workers get no vacation time credit for the time they were on strike.

Several teamsters were fired after the company resumed publication. But the ruthlessness of the new regime was still underestimated. Not only were union men victims, but white collar workers too. Shortly after resumption of publication two dispatchers (immediate supervisors to drivers and jumpers) were fired because "they didn't fit in with the company's plans." One of the men had 42 years seniority; the other had 37.

Grievances from all unions in the plant have been rapidly piling up. Every: thing from work standards to vacation pay and hiring practices have become issues of contention. The unions, beaten badly in the last strike, are attempting to mediate these disputes, but the hardened attitude taken by the company has caused some unionists to predict a strike, even though few workers want one. One union leader urged his members to prepare for a strike developing "possibly before the end of the year."

Indications that the paper is preparing for a strike are numerous. Besides all the grievances and fortifications, the company halted plans for construction of a new building and printing plant. Apparently management hopes to move into its new headquarters at some later date, having disposed of the nuisance of labor unions.

It is rumored that management has imported pro printers from Amarillo, Texas to help run the presses in the event of a strike.

While relations between the company and all employees is bad, black employees have indicated that racism is flagrant with the *News* management. There are hardly any black people in professional positions as executives or journalists with the company. Supervisors are all white.

Most of the black employees are jumpers, janitors, guards, or clerks in the offices. Many of the supervisors in the departments are considered racists, many of them Wallace supporters. The logic behind the action of the *News* is difficult to understand. Their pressures on the workers are probably a result of their understanding of economic necessity. Management would like to carry out an extensive plan of automation which will eliminate many jobs, perhaps whole unions. They cannot automate because of union resistance.

The unions are out to lower work standards, [sic] protect jobs, and, if possible, hire more help. The company feels the union interfered with its attempts to improve existing facilities and thereby to increase profits. The unions must therefore be removed as an obstacle.

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