

Despite Losing \$500 Million, Detroit Newspapers Still Refuse to Settle



Locked out Detroit newspaper workers marked 1,000 days off the job with a march through city streets.

Jim West/Impact Visuals

by Jenny Van Proeyen

With slogans like "1,000 days is long enough," locked-out newspaper workers and their supporters took to the streets of Detroit on May 20.

The march and rally were not only a protest against the two newspapers involved, but also targeted the National Labor Relations Board. The NLRB has yet to decide appeals of rulings against the papers on ten unfair labor practice charges.

The charges date to the beginning of the strike; they allege that the papers' unfair labor practices were the strike's cause.

"Justice delayed is justice denied," chanted protesters.

This spring marked the 1,000-day milestone of the labor dispute. In July 1995 members of the six Detroit newspaper unions were forced out on strike. They have been locked out since February 1997, when management refused the unions' offer to return to work.

The May march came soon after a summit sponsored by the community group Religious Leaders for Justice at the Detroit Newspapers; the summit was endorsed by 24 area governments and included almost 300 community leaders, concerned citizens, union officials, and locked-out workers. But invited representatives from the news-

papers were noticeably absent.

Since the six unions offered to return to work, only about 460 people of about 2,000 original strikers have returned to their jobs. Many returnees have not been placed in their previous positions and are receiving lower wages—some up to 50 percent less than their pre-strike pay. In certain job classifications, such as home delivery managers represented by Teamsters Local 372, no one has been called back.

Although the strike and lock-out has cost media giants Gannett and Knight-Ridder, owners of the two Detroit newspapers, \$500 million, they still refuse to settle.

Management says the papers are rebounding as more and more readers return. Circulation figures tell a different story. According to recent Audit Bureau of Circulation figures, the papers' combined circulation is still down about 33 percent from pre-strike levels. One returned worker says, "The companies have lost half-a-billion dollars and have an army of goons and scabs and they still can't win this. We're still hurting them bad."

CARRYING ON

Rank and file locked-out workers and supporters carry on the fight. One group, Shut-Down Motown, not only

organized the May 20 march and rally, but put together Operation Zero Growth, a campaign that targets circulation in certain cities by leafletting subscribers and stores that sell the papers. This operation was so successful in one community that newspaper executives went door-to-door there trying to boost subscription numbers.

Another group, the Action Coalition of Strikers and Supporters, helped to coordinate a "spring offensive" that sent speakers across Canada and the Pacific Northwest to raise awareness of the continuing struggle.

Rank and file were also behind a protest at a May 30 symposium at the University of Michigan that featured Tony Ridder, CEO of Knight-Ridder. Protesters inside the auditorium refused to remain quiet as Ridder tried to lead a panel discussion. After about 20 minutes of being bombarded by questions about the newspaper lock-out, a rattled Ridder left the conference.

As the July 13 third anniversary nears, rank and file groups are planning to commemorate with a picnic.

What can they celebrate after so long? "We need to celebrate our strength," responds Barbara Ingalls, a locked-out member of DTU Local 18. "It's just another sign of our unity and that we'll last one day longer." □