

Newsworkers Unite: Labor, Convergence, and North American Newspapers, by Catherine McKercher (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002, \$75 hard cover, \$27.95 paperback) 232 pages.

Reviewed by Marc Edge

The recent trends toward increasing concentration of press ownership and technological convergence of media have served to put organized labor at a disadvantage. Concentration has resulted in larger, more diversified media corporations, which are often powerful international conglomerates. These employers have proven ever more formidable adversaries across the bargaining table due to their increased and more centralized resources. Convergence has served to eliminate whole categories of labor and to create additional opportunities for corporate cost-cutting across media.

These phenomena have been well documented from an industry standpoint, but less attention has been paid by scholars to their effect on media workers. The unions, however, notably The Newspaper Guild (TNG) and the International Typographical Union (ITU), took notice early on of these threats to their very existence. As a result, furious efforts ensued to form strategic alliances aimed at self-preservation. But unlike the cold economic logic that usually governs corporate mergers and takeovers, labor unions are subject to often fractious politics, which can make such matters unpredictable at best.

The result has made for a fascinating study by Canadian media scholar Catherine McKercher, the title of which is not the exhortation it seems at first glance but rather a well-documented account of recent union consolidation. An important chapter of labor history, it is packed with such primary sources as interviews with many of the union officials involved. It lacks only a glossary to aid the uninitiated in keeping track of the seemingly endless acronyms. An associate professor in the School of Journalism at Carleton University in Ottawa, McKercher's position north of the border allows for an interesting perspective to her study. The Canadian locals of the media unions, in addition to seeking security, also often sought a measure of autonomy from the American influence which historically dominated them. Answering "the Canadian question" in the second half of her book thus results in a study as much of nationalism as of media and labor convergence. From there, McKercher narrows her focus even further, to examine the forced convergence of labor at Pacific Press in Vancouver on Canada's west coast. The case study makes for a fitting climax to McKercher's research, which is an updated version of her humanities dissertation, completed in 2000 at Concordia University in Montreal.

A former newspaper journalist, McKercher provides a useful history of newspaper unions by tracing the 18th Century origins of the craft guilds that comprised the first unions of printers in London and New York in the days

when typesetter and editor were often one. The National Typographical Union formed in 1850 became the ITU soon thereafter when Canadian printers were admitted, but the process quickly became one of divergence instead, with pressmen, photoengravers and journalists breaking away from the ITU to form separate unions. By 1960, however, the looming technological changes that threatened to make the work of compositors redundant through the use of computer technology led many in the ITU to conclude that it had been a mistake to allow their co-workers to break away. An ITU bid that year to create One Big Union of newspaper workers in an attempt to oppose the growing might of newspaper chain employers broke down by 1962, however, under the weight of inter-union rivalries. A proposed ITU/TNG merger fell apart in 1982 and the ITU merged four years later with the giant Communication Workers of America (CWA) of more than 600,000 telephone and telecommunications workers.

That left the Guild still seeking a partner for protection, but it took another decade to accomplish the task, with the CWA finally emerging in 1996 as the logical choice. In the meantime, however, the Canadian question had raised its nationalistic head north of the border. In 1994, the country's largest TNG local, the Southern Ontario Newspaper Guild (SONG) broke away in a long-running dispute over Canadian autonomy and affiliated with the 137,000-member Communications, Energy, and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP). The CEP had been formed in 1990 as the country's fourth-largest private sector union by a hydra-headed merger between unions of paperworkers, energy workers, a Montreal ITU local that balked at joining the CWA, and the Canadian arm of the CWA that had broken away in the early 1970s. Strengthened in 1993 by 8,000 broadcasters from the Canadian arm of NABET and in 1994 by nine more Canadian ITU locals unhappy in the CWA, the CEP emerged by mid-decade as the popular choice as one big media union north of the border.

Thus it was the logical choice for workers at Pacific Press in 1996 when they were forced to choose one union after the publisher of the *Vancouver Sun* and *Province* newspapers applied to the British Columbia Labor Relations Board to consolidate its seven fractious unions into one bargaining unit. The move had been mooted by management for decades in an attempt to prevent the recurring strikes that had halted publication seven times between 1967 and 1994 for as long as eight months at a time. For decades the small but powerful unions of printers and pressmen had won rich contract settlements as well as expensive press manning clauses and lifetime job guarantees for the compositors displaced by computerized typesetting. The larger Guild, whose size and diverse membership made it a weaker bargaining opponent, benefited all the same from the high wages extracted from Pacific Press by the more determined crafts. The resulting extra expense and frequent shutdowns made Pacific Press notable among local newspaper monopolies in North America for often racking up millions in annual losses. While the newly-installed CEP attempted to put a brave face on the mandated merger, the company move was widely seen as an attempt to gain a bargaining advantage and finally tame its militant unions.

When time eventually proves whether the tactic works or not, it will also test the media unions' faith in strength of numbers. McKercher's account of the often tortured tale, which would be equally useful in a labor history or a communications course, provides a useful background.

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