



NRJ Books

On Deadline: Labor Relations in Newspaper Publishing

by Stephen R. Sleigh

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reviewed by Marc Edge

Sleigh is a former printer turned sociologist, and his background shows through in this study of managing technological change in the newspaper industry. While presented as a series of case studies at different newspapers across the U.S., the majority of the book centers around the 1990-91 strike at the

Daily News in New York City while Sleigh was a Ph.D. student at the City University there. As such, it is the third book on the *Daily News* strike (the others, by Vigilante and Jennings, were published four and five years earlier, respectively) and is by far the least comprehensive of the three, but broader in scope of comparison to other newspapers.

Sleigh's orientation as a printer is obvious, and this seems to be his target audience. He throws around model names of printing presses expecting the reader to know the difference between a Goss Headliner and a Rockwell-Goss Metroliner. But what shows through most is his labor bias, displayed through such choice of words as "struggle" to refer to the *Daily News* strike. Workers with lifetime job guarantees are seen as victims of management's decision to use technological change to its best advantage.

Following a brief history of printing technology, Sleigh ends his opening chapter on a shaky note when he demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of the newspaper business. He repeats the popular misconception that the industry suffers from lack of profitability, which Ben Bagdikian in *The Media Monopoly* calls "the best-kept secret in American newspapering." Bagdikian points out that publishers cultivated this myth for years to advantage with advertisers and workers. Sleigh points to the underperformance of newspaper stocks as evidence of unprofitability, as if share prices were a mere profit index.

Sleigh then goes into three different case studies of how improvements in printing technology have been implemented in different situations, union and non-union. He cites the approach taken at the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* in 1987 as an example of management taking the "high road" and involving unionized workers in the decision-making process. Workers whose jobs were

replaced by the new presses were offered buyouts, while those remaining were given advanced training, including visits to operating presses at various locations around the country. As a result of this collaborative approach, the switch to new technology went smoothly.

In contrast, the *Chicago Tribune* took the opposite approach, attempting in 1985 to impose on unions their expectations of how changes would be implemented. This aggressive approach led to a bitter strike, during which the *Tribune* continued publishing by using replacement workers which effectively broke the unions. Victory came at a price, however, as a complaint of unfair labor practices by the unions brought a damage award of \$8.5 million for failing to negotiate in good faith. The union-busting success of the management team foreshadowed events at the *Daily News*, which was also owned by the *Tribune*.

A third example of managing technological change is presented in a non-union context at the *Miami Herald*, where Sleight worked as an installer of new presses in 1983. A curious culture emerges, with different departments dominated by different ethnic groups – blacks in paper handling, Cubans in maintenance and whites in the electrical shop, with the pressroom comparatively integrated. The ethnic mix required as much bargaining between departments and with management as any union shop would. Despite the lack of job guarantees as in unionized environments, job cuts were achieved by attrition and early retirement and the technological transition went generally smoothly.

The bulk of the book deals with the *Daily News* strike, which went on for 147 days and resulted in the *Tribune* company basically paying the late British media magnate Robert Maxwell to take the paper and all its attendant problems off their hands. In the interim, estimates place *Tribune* losses at upwards of \$400 million. While the *Daily News* was able to keep publishing with replacement workers as the *Tribune* had done in Chicago, the union was able to organize an effective boycott that strangled both advertising and distribution.

Under "Conclusions," Sleight launches into a description of a previously unmentioned 1989-90 study of workplace governance he did using a focus group of executives and labor leaders. This is followed by some comments from outside observers about the nature of bargaining in the newspaper industry. Sleight then seems to finally draw a conclusion that, "Simple calls for cooperation, or naive judgments about the ease with which change will come, are misplaced in the newspaper industry, as elsewhere." Aside from the dated nature of his information, this is hardly an academic treatment of the research he has done.

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