

The Labor Beat: An Introduction

Max Fraser and Christopher Phelps

When *Los Angeles Times* labor reporter Nancy Cleeland, a recipient of the Pulitzer Prize, took a buyout in 2011, she regretted that the paper had become “increasingly anti-union in its editorial policy.” Her editors were uninterested in how low-wage immigrant labor and income inequality were reshaping Southern California—and obsessed with crime and celebrity.¹

Is labor journalism in unique trouble today, or has it always been a precarious endeavor? Even at the peak of the liberal consensus, when US union density was at a high point, publishers were mostly indifferent or hostile to unions. Writing in 1960—in one of organized labor’s metropolitan strongholds, no less—*New Yorker* press critic A. J. Liebling faulted the city’s newspapers for their coverage of a Long Island Rail Road walkout. “The strikers,” he wrote, “like those in practically every account of a strike I have ever read in a newspaper, were wrong.”²

Even journalists brimming with the best of intentions do not write news under conditions of their own choosing, given the power of publishers, editors, and advertisers. That makes it all the more impressive that so many have covered the labor beat with alacrity, including those profiled in this issue: John Swinton and

1. Cleeland, “Why I’m Leaving.”

2. Liebling, *The Press*, 108.

Joseph Buchanan in the nineteenth century; Heywood Broun, Benjamin Stolberg, Trezzvant Anderson, and Barbara Ehrenreich in the twentieth; and Steven Greenhouse, Jane Slaughter, and Sarah Jaffe today.

That labor journalism is worthy of study—not just citation—by historians has been proved by such prior scholarship as Robert Rosenstone on John Reed, Dee Garrison on Mary Heaton Vorse, Elizabeth Faue on Eva Valesh, and David Witwer on Westbrook Pegler.³ Nevertheless, the history of labor journalism is still understudied. That it would benefit from more excavation is indicated by the intricacies explored in the articles and interviews in this issue of *Labor*: the tremendous variety of forms that labor journalism has taken, from strike reportage and spirited opinion columns to exposés; the interdependence of sympathetic journalists and organized labor, despite occasional tensions; and the transformation of journalists' working conditions across time, from the days of the small printer-publisher to the mid-century newspaper conglomerate and today's cable-news, Internet-propelled 24-hour environment.

Arranged by chronology of coverage, the essays in this issue reveal both variations and continuities in labor journalism over time. In the Gilded Age, Kim Moody finds, hundreds of local labor papers flourished independently of official trade-union organs, comprising a working-class communication network. Political divisions on the Left in the 1930s underlay conflicting newspaper coverage of the CIO, suggests Christopher Phelps in his portrayal of a Popular Front columnist's clash with an anti-Stalinist reporter. Willie James Griffin discovers an outspoken African American postal employee and labor unionist of the New Deal era whose writings for the black press compelled openings in federal employment opportunity. That rarity of

3. Rosenstone, *Romantic Revolutionary*; Garrison, *Mary Heaton Vorse*; Faue, *Writing the Wrongs*; Witwer, *Shadow of the Racketeer*.

labor journalism, a national bestseller, is illuminated by Gabriel Winant's treatment of Ehrenreich's 1996 book *Nickel and Dimed*, which his research shows was the culmination of her New Left and feminist interrogations of class and gender in the 1960s and 1970s. Rounding out our coverage, Max Fraser interviews three writers whose work has appeared everywhere, from the *New York Times* to *The Nation*, about the challenges of labor journalism today, an anxious time for both unions and newspapers.

"Labor journalism is dying," is a refrain sometimes heard these days. Perhaps—but as becomes clear across this special issue, the fortunes of labor and its chroniclers tend to wax and wane together. Just as historians have always leaned upon journalism for the proverbial first draft of history, so too labor itself has always drawn sustenance, and always will, from those working the labor beat. ▣

MAX FRASER received his PhD in American History at Yale in 2017. He has reported widely on the labor movement, contributes a regular column to *New Labor Forum*, and spent five years working at *The Nation*. He is currently a Junior Fellow at the Dartmouth Society of Fellows.

CHRISTOPHER PHELPS, associate professor of American Studies at the University of Nottingham, is author of *Young Sidney Hook: Marxist and Pragmatist* (1997) and coauthor with Howard Brick of *Radicalism in America: The U.S. Left since the Second World War* (2015).

References

- Cleeland, Nancy. 2011. "Why I'm Leaving the L.A. Times." *Huffington Post*, May 25. www.huffingtonpost.com/nancy-cleeland/why-im-leaving-the-la-tim_b_49697.html.
- Faue, Elizabeth. 2004. *Writing the Wrongs: Eva Valesh and the Rise of Labor Journalism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Garrison, Dee. 1989. *Mary Heaton Vorse: The Life of an American Insurgent*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Liebling, A. J. 1961. *The Press*. New York: Ballantine.
- Rosenstone, Robert. 1975. *Romantic Revolutionary: A Biography of John Reed*. New York: Knopf.
- Witwer, David. 2009. *Shadow of the Racketeer: Scandal in Organized Labor*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.