

# Media Unions Brainstorm On Joint Organizing, Battling Firms' Ills

*By Mark Gruenberg  
WBNG Secretary*

BALTIMORE – Joint organizing, the possibility of workers' buying media companies, union-sponsored cross-training in each others' fields, and crafting proposals to help media companies' arrest their financial declines were among ideas at a three-day conference convened to explore ways to enhance union influence in the news-media industry.

The Jan. 10-12 conclave, assembled by The Newspaper Guild-CWA, attracted more than 100 delegates from TNG and two other CWA media-union sectors: The Printing, Publishing and Media Workers (International Typographical Union) and the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians (NABET).



*Former Washington Post editor  
Leslie Walker.*

All three CWA sector unions face similar situations: Media firms that are teetering, in part because they are losing money and advertisers to the Internet and other alternative means of communications.

Faced with those declines, and a deep recession from which they may not recover any time soon, the media firms that employ the union workers have floundered in their responses. Their usual tactic is to demand givebacks, cut pensions and health insurance, fire workers, and outsource functions.

The extreme responses have included bankruptcy filings by one big media conglomerate – The Tribune Co., which owns the unionized Baltimore Sun – with bankruptcy threats from others, including newspapers in Denver, Seattle, and Minneapolis (where Star-Tribune management filed for bankruptcy protection on Jan. 15).

After listening to guest speaks and analysts, the union delegates held wide-ranging discussions during which they appeared to agree on alternative strategies to



*More than 100 CWA members gathered in Baltimore.*

combat downsizing and not only preserve current jobs but help create growing enterprises. Proposals discussed at the conference included:

- \* Using part of CWA's Strategic Industry Fund, now earmarked for organizing and strike support, to help union locals construct strategies for dealing with "financially distressed employers." CWA President Larry Cohen was favorable to the idea, saying "We want to play offense, not defense," in such cases.

- \* Exploring various methods of true worker ownership of the media firms, even though Tribune Co. owner Sam Zell's establishment of an employee stock ownership plan (ESOP) plan there left the workers with financially worthless shares while Zell ran up a multi-billion-dollar debt. Tribune owns the Sun, the Los Angeles Times, its namesake Chicago Tribune, and extensive broadcast properties.

- \* Using other unions' examples of labor-management cooperation in retooling enterprises for ideas for reversing media firms' downturn. Delegates also pondered case studies in union-management cooperation. Those cases covered everything from reasons for it – such as Japanese competition that prodded Harley-Davidson to accept the Machinists' ideas for retooling the company – to outcomes such as flatter corporate structures, as seen in the UAW-represented joint GM-Toyota plant in Fremont, Calif.

- \* Exploring ways to make workers more valuable to the firms, and thus tougher to fire. Many delegates noted

that workers originally trained as print reporters are now taking pictures, too, for example. And broadcast workers often find three former occupations – reporting, camera work, and editing – rolled into one. The unionists discussed cross-training – sponsored by CWA and often at a far lower cost than media owners found elsewhere – that could enhance workers’ value.

\* Making the strong point that the unions should go to management and say “we have some good ideas that



*WBNG members at the mic: Bill Salganik, top; Mark Gruenberg, below.*



will help you” rescue the media firms. Case after case that the delegates studied showed that managers have no ideas on how to reverse the declines.

“A choice that we made early on was to create a vision of hope for newspapers,” centered around

the concept that higher quality produces more circulation, more ad revenue, and higher profits, said Sara Steffens of the Northern California Media Guild, whose local recently achieved joint organizing success at all Singleton-conglomerate-owned papers in the San Fran-

cisco Bay area – a success gained in the face of Singleton’s especially nasty deceit attempts.

In a statement that could equally apply not to just other media unions, but also other unions, Steffens added: “The Guild can be a platform to promote quality journalism – and to get management to listen to our ideas.”

The media firms’ financial problems were not the only topic of the conference. The three sectors also discussed joint organizing, centered on the idea of “city committees” that could unite print, broadcast, and ITU locals in the same metro area.

Cohen backed the ideas, and praised the delegates for innovation.

He said that followed in the union’s tradition of tackling problems in advance, as CWA did in its “Bell” telephone-operating companies

20 years ago. He also reminded the delegates of the importance of the Employee Free Choice Act, which once passed will help level the playing field between workers and bosses – and give media unions and others more leverage at the bargaining table in good times as well as bad. But management would be deadset against it, Cohen said: “They’re interested in tyranny.”

*Long-time Washington-Baltimore Newspaper Guild officer Mark Gruenberg is the editor of Press Associates Union News Service (press\_associates@yahoo.com)*



*WBNG Treasurer Sheila Lindsay*

---

***“A choice that we made early on was to create a vision of hope for newspapers,” centered around the concept that higher quality produces more circulation, more ad revenue, and higher profits.”***

**– Sara Steffens  
Northern California Media Guild**

---

**Photos by Moe Thomas – NABET-CWA Local 52031**