

Pizzigati, Sam, and Fred J. Solowey, eds. *The New Labor Press. Journalism for a Changing Union Movement*

Ron Verzuh

Volume 48, numéro 3, 1993

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/050888ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/050888ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (imprimé)

1703-8138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Verzuh, R. (1993). Compte rendu de [Pizzigati, Sam, and Fred J. Solowey, eds. *The New Labor Press. Journalism for a Changing Union Movement*]. *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 48(3), 591–592.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/050888ar>

The New Labor Press: Journalism for a Changing Union Movement, by Sam Pizzigati and Fred J. Solowey, eds., Cornell University, Ithaca, N. Y., ILR Press, 256 p, ISBN 0-87546-189-1 (cloth), ISBN 0-87546-190-5 (pbk.)

One of the great debates that secretly looms in labour editor circles is the question of editorial control and the companion concern about union press credibility. Should the editor of a union newspaper or magazine be able to decide what goes in its pages? This debate is at the heart of *The New Labor Press*, an honest and sincere book on the state of union journalism in the United States.

Some labour editors will smirk at the above question, arguing that there is no point in trying to “play” journalist at what is so clearly a house organ press controlled by union leaders. (A 1991 survey of Canadian labour editors that I conducted for the Canadian Association of Labour Media showed that 51 of the 101 respondents must vet their publication with a leader before going to press.)

They argue that the leaders have to answer to the membership, after all, and should therefore decide what is good for them to read. Editors are public relations people whose job is to serve the communications needs of leadership, they say, and that is that.

Besides, most union editors have so many other tasks to perform that the union publication is often a last-minute affair. (The CALM survey showed that only 12 of the 48 paid union editors surveyed spend more than 50 per cent of their time producing the publication.)

This book challenges those arguments. Many of the chapters, submitted by working union editors and long-time union observers, are persuasive pleas for a rethinking of how unions communicate with their members.

The crux of the challenge is that a union press must be for, by and about members. Too often, it is by, for and about leaders. But in most chapters the challenge is not issued in a bitter or confrontational way. Instead, the book suggests that the credibility of unions and their leaders, both with members and the public, hinges on a new labour press which is member-oriented.

The chapter entitled “Taking Readers Seriously” by David Elsila, full-time editor of *Solidarity*, the respected United Auto Workers monthly, speaks to this issue. He describes how *Solidarity* was reshaped to reach members, rather than being aimed exclusively at activists as is the case with some union papers.

The rethinking included a critical letters section, a short story page which publishes fiction by members, and a culture page. The latter is an attempt to go beyond the workplace into the daily lives of workers. To inform members of the UAW view on major issues, *Solidarity* often opts for a house ad format, using large magazine-style images and few words to get the message across. Finally, Elsila often assigns reporters to cover stories. The first edition of the new *Solidarity* featured a cover story about the Seoul Olympics. The magazine actually sent a reporter to get the story from an autoworker’s point of view.

Assigning stories, breaking news, investigating employers, these are almost unheard of in Canadian union press circles. Why? *The New Labor Press* suggests that

the future of the movement depends on leaders and editors coming to terms with this question and the credibility/control issue.

As with other chapters, this is dealt with frankly and openly in an interview with three national union leaders conducted by Solowey. In the interview, the United Mineworkers' Richard Trumka notes that he sees his union's journal when the members see it. "Leadership is the same thing as the credibility of your newspaper," he says. "You lead when the membership trusts you. If you squander that trust, then you lose the ability to lead."

Pizzigati and Solowey revisit the theme in their concluding chapter when they quote Tom Donahue, secretary-treasurer of the AFL-CIO: "We all believe that a free press is what makes democratic institutions thrive and a controlled house press is not a free press."

Other chapters deal with the struggle to create a community labour press such as *Racine Labor*, the debate about a national labour daily or weekly, and the failings of union media relations. One chapter focuses on the local union newsletter press. Another deals with labour cartoons, another technology and still another the labour TV show *We Do The Work*. There are also chapters on racism, multiculturalism and women in the labour press. But the central theme is unavoidable: the union press must renew itself as a credible, uncontrolled membership press.

The New Labor Press is not a how-to guide to transforming the union press. The editors and authors know that each union has to work out its own direction. What they are saying is, with only 16 per cent of the American workforce in unions, a new communications strategy is critically important to the very survival of the American movement.

Can Canadian unions remain complacent about this question? If the answer is no, as it surely must be, then *The New Labor Press* is a welcome guide to a badly needed discussion on the renewal of the labour press. In fact, it's a must-read by every labour leader and union editor who cares about empowering members by giving them the information they need to fight the union battles of the 1990s.

Ron VERZUH

Canadian Union of Public Employees

Managerial Unionism: Issues in Perspective, by Baldev R. Sharma, New Delhi, Shri Ram Centre for Industrial Relations and Human Resources, 1993, 291 p. (pas de ISBN)

The book presents the results of empirical research of Officers' Associations (OAs) in India. The purpose of the research was to provide answers to the eight questions listed in Chapter 1. "What is the history and extent of OAs? What factors prompted the officers to form OAs? What are the activities of OAs? What type of methods are employed by OAs in the pursuit of their objectives? What is the background profile of the rank-and-file membership of OAs and what are their experiences at the workplace?"