



Trade Union Editor: Back room scribe or strategic powerhouse?

By David Hoets

Having worked alongside UNI's trade union editors at conferences, I know them to be capable and dedicated individuals. However, some unions seem to be under-utilising their editors. I get the impression that these unions regard their editors solely as the scribes required to assemble the letters, reports, speeches and press releases that make up that necessary nuisance, the union publication.

Used as trailblazers, TU editors can shape events and clear the way for major achievements. This anecdote illustrates the role a trade union editor can play when faced with intransigent employers:

A farmer had an obstinate mule. He called in a consultant on mules. The consultant took a close look at the mule then picked up a heavy plank and hit it between the eyes 'I hired you to cure my mule, not to kill it,' howled the farmer. 'I will cure your mule,' said the mule consultant, 'but first I need its attention.'

By exposing employers' malpractices in a manner that embarrasses them, trade union editors can become effective 'mule consultants' who prepare the way for the union negotiators. In my experience, perpetually fuming about the hardships that employers are inflicting on their workers is counter-productive. Employers know what they are doing to their workers . . . and they don't give a damn.

It is more productive to show employers how they might be retarding their own causes.

Variations on this theme have worked well for me over the years:

'It takes a lifetime of excellent management to persuade 40 000 workers to wake up each morning wanting to give of their best for the company - and just one selfish, short-sighted autocrat to undo all that good.'

This gives rise to another point: should the union publication carp at every employer action? Or should it give credit where credit is due?

If unions only ever criticise, it becomes pointless for managements to make any concessions. A union publication can achieve much through the push-pull of praise and criticism.

My experience has been that praising a company - when praise is merited - helps to lead it in the desired direction and adds credence to our criticisms.

The union editor can become an invaluable intelligence agent by writing profiles of company departments and of retired executives. The latter tend to become expansive and to spill the beans when their egos are tapped.

This snippet gleaned from a retired general manager worked well for several unions over many years:

'Those who have not been there cannot possibly understand the pressures of the negotiating chamber. As managers, we were often sent into negotiations with inflexible mandates from our directors. They would say: 'Don't go a cent over eight per cent, because that will cost us R50-million.' During the negotiations we would discover that

our employees had legitimate grievances and demands. At the end of the day, the union's members were our members, too. It simply did not make business sense to pay R50-million for long faces and protest meetings, when R55-million could buy a happy, union-endorsed result.'

Over the years, use of this salient argument has frequently squeezed that little bit extra out of the negotiating pot.

Management has the **power**. But who really has the **influence**?

I believe that large corporations can achieve better results by co-operating with trade unions than they can by opposing them. In today's complex business environment, the CEO's call for greater productivity has become a cliché. But a union that is able to make the same call in the sure knowledge that its members will benefit from their increased productivity can achieve exceptional results.

Bona fide pay and productivity agreements change the role of trade union editors. They find themselves writing 'management copy' by urging their members to help cut costs and produce more.

Does that matter if the result is going to be a more prosperous and stable employer, better-remunerated employees and a successful trade union?

Several of the many general secretaries and union presidents with whom I have been involved over the past three decades have successfully used their publications as frontline weapons. In some instances these leaders were able to use a short-term *blitzkrieg* approach. Other issues required months - even years - of weathering.

Here, *inter alia*, are some key issues in which union newspapers were used to good effect:

- Forcing anti-union employers to the bargaining table
- Substantially improving pay offers
- Derailing a major take-over bid
- Achieving far-reaching changes to employment policies
- Orchestrating protest actions
- Exposing employer malpractices
- Uniting genders and races
- Engineering union mergers and takeovers
- Forcing medical aid funds to tackle cost-raising supplier abuses
- Winning national support for social issues
- Combating crime and internal fraud
- Boosting recruitment on an ongoing basis

Other issues

A few years ago UNI unveiled a plan (mooted, I think, by a British academic) whereby a panel of impartial experts be established to rate the corporate social responsibility records of major corporations.

Pursuant to these ratings, international pressure would be applied to ensure that only those corporations with acceptable CSR ratings be considered as sponsors at such 'people events' as the Olympic Games, Football World Cup, etc.

In my opinion, that plan contains the seeds of genius.

With a co-ordinated follow-up this plan could:

- Create a greater global awareness of the need for CSR.
- Entrench CSR standards.
- Result in the regular publication of a high-profile corporate CSR barometer.

- Prevent companies that short-change their employees and consumers from posing as public benefactors when it suits them
- Rule out the purchase of favours from sports administrators.
- Force corporations to self-regulate to avoid the humiliation and the loss of market share that would follow their being barred from sponsoring/advertising at major sporting events.

Is this not a potential breakthrough that needs to be vigorously pursued by unions and their editors?

The foregoing perhaps ignores the most important role of the trade union editor. She or he is the only union representative who calls on every member, every month – and more often in some cases.

The publications and websites that trade union editors produce are visible evidence of their unions' existence and influence. To the silent majority who faithfully pay their dues without ever coming into contact with their union, the union's media voices are the sole evidence of the union's existence and worth.

Perhaps unions need to be made more aware of the value of these journalistic roles.

Maximising the trade union editors' contributions would demand special efforts by unions and their editors. Unions would need to upgrade the roles of their editors and include them in planning sessions and management meetings. For their part, the editors would need to spend more time with members in their proverbial smoky halls and in helping to write union reports, speeches and press statements, all of which could result in a better integrated and more incisive communications effort.

Additional communications budgeting would almost certainly have to come into the equation. However, properly handled the returns would far outweigh the cost.

ENDS

Hacks or heroes?

By David Hoets

What are we trade union editors - hacks producing bland copy for 'nothing' newspapers - or heroic Robin Hoods robbing the rich to feed the poor?

Our issues are so repetitive that we sometimes feel we are composing melodies for a music box as we write again and again about job threats, salaries, solidarity, negotiations, cut-backs, conferences, outsourcing, elections, recruiting, general secretaries' reports, new year messages and more recruiting.

We have to use the simplest language (I once headlined a story 'Pay rise compromise' and was upbraided by a reader who did not receive the pay rise she had been 'compromised'), and what we write often goes unnoticed.

Or does it?

Trade union stories are like pebbles tossed into a pond – they create ripples.

Look back on most trade union editors' careers and you will find that when they asked their readers to recruit, they recruited; to get angry, they became angry; to protest, they protested; to mourn or cry, they did so.

Trade union editors have the advantage of being told what lousy, unreadable publications they produce. Most writers would prefer that immediacy to apathy.

Recently, I found myself seated opposite a lady who had been a senior reporter on *The Times*. She had spent her career writing elevated words for an elevated audience. We compared notes.

I told her about the blue-collar workers in one of my muddy little editorial pools who were so chained to their production line that they could not be seen to be doing anything but working. 'Hell, man, you write a good newspaper. Whenever it arrives the boys grab it and go straight to the lavatory,' they told me.

'I'd have given anything for that kind of recognition,' *The Times* reporter told me. 'I seldom met anyone who had read my words.'

Trade union writing and editing cannot be all that bad. F. Scott Fitzgerald died a drunken wreck at 42; Hemingway shot himself for similar reasons at 61; Kingsley Amiss spent his last days scrounging accommodation off his ex-wife and her new husband. Most trade union editors escape such dismal fates. We get to work at the craft we love, our words are seen, they do make a difference and we earn more than most published authors.

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Consulting editor to Sasbo and other South African unions for the past 28 years. During that time David also produced South African Maturity, a magazine dealing with pre-retirement planning and post-retirement lifestyles.

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