

Dealing with the Media



The union members at United Fabricators just voted to accept a new contract. For months the Company had tried to make them agree to pay 50 percent of their health insurance costs. The members had resisted and the negotiating committee stayed firm. The new contract contained good pay raises and they held the line on the insurance costs. Ideal Fabrizio, the chief steward, stood outside of the union hall looking for any reporters. In previous negotiations reporters usually showed up but today none appeared to be there. "This would have been a good story," thought Ideal.

Anne Burlak, the president of the union at Hillcrest Nursing Home, was furious. The local newspaper had a story about a demonstration the nursing home workers had held the day before to protest understaffing, forced overtime and the effect this had on the patients. The newspaper had it all wrong. "Just look at this" she said. "They quote me saying that taking care of old people is a pain in the back. That's not

what I said. I was trying to explain to the reporter that when we are short-staffed and we have to work 10 hours a day lifting patients, there are more back injuries. They made us look like jerks."

There are lots of reasons why unions should talk to the press. Often we need the support of the community in taking on a battle with the employer. Getting the word out to large numbers of people can usually only be accomplished by getting coverage in the media. (Though the union should never ignore the value of passing out leaflets informing the public of what is happening, especially if their workplace is regularly visited by the public, like a grocery store or a university.) Good stories in the press and on the internet can also lead to contacts for organizing new workplaces.

Many times the union can't avoid talking to the press. In some communities, it's likely that the press will show up if a union local holds an informational picket line in front of their workplace — regardless of whether they contact the press or not.

The key to getting good media coverage is being prepared and not leaving dealing with the press to chance.

Writing a Press Release

The best way to get media coverage for a union event or to explain the union's point of view is to send out a press release. A press release is a short explanation of the facts the union wishes to be made known that is sent to the various media, radio, newspapers, and TV stations.

Writing the release is somewhat like preparing a grievance. The basic elements of a press release are: WHO, WHY, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN. Additional elements of the release should be some quotes (because the media like to quote the people involved) and a person to contact for additional information. *(See the next page for an example of a very short press release.)*

Press releases should be short and to the point. They are designed to get the press' attention. They also need to contain enough information so they can be used as the basis for a story. In these times many newspapers don't have "labor reporters" any more, and many small newspapers have only a few reporters. Often they will simply print the press release as a story.

Avoiding Union Jargon

Most people in the union movement get used to certain terms, and know what they mean. Seniority, job posting, job bidding, grievance, voluntary overtime, speed-up, job descriptions, labor grades, union security. All these are terms that union members frequently use and they understand what they mean. The problem is that the general public usually has no idea what is being talked about. The odds are that the reporter you are talking to has no idea what you mean. It is worth the effort to explain

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simply what is meant when using “union language.”

“We are holding this protest because the company violated the just cause clause of our contract when they fired Bill Haywood.” OR

“We are holding this protest because the company did not provide any evidence of wrongdoing by Bill Haywood when they fired him. This violates our union contract and offends everyone who believes that people are innocent until proven guilty.”

Here are a few sample explanations of some union jargon. With a little work they could be made even shorter.

Seniority System: A seniority system provides both the union and management with a fair, non-discriminatory way of deciding who gets promoted or laid off. A seniority system gives more preference to employees who have worked longer for the employer.

Grievance procedure: A system that allows employees to take up problems with management using representatives they elect. Since the employer must meet with union representatives using the grievance procedure, it guarantees that employee concerns get addressed.

Speed-up: The employer is trying to make workers work harder and produce more without taking into account workers’ health and safety or quality of the product (or service).

Getting the Press Release Out

Every UE local should make a list of all the news outlets in their area — including newspapers, radio, television, and online publications. In many areas there are weekly newspapers that will give more in-depth coverage to a local interest story. Be sure to include the “weekly shopper” papers, which also like to carry little local interest stories.

Someone from the local then needs to find contact information for each outlet. Websites are a good place to start; they will often have a dedicated email address for press releases, and will sometimes list reporters and their “beats,” or areas that they cover. Few media outlets have dedicated

PRESS RELEASE

New Bedford, Massachusetts— Hillcrest Nursing Home workers will rally on Tuesday, May 1, 2003 to protest lack of staffing and its effect on nursing home residents. The 3:00 p.m. rally is sponsored by UE Local 288, the union that represents the nursing home staff.

The union says a 15-employee shortage forces staff to work 10 to 12 hours a day, six days a week. The result is injuries and stress for workers and inadequate care for residents. “Many of our clients need to be lifted and doing this for 12 hours a day is causing many workers to suffer back strains,” says union president Ann Burlak. “We are concerned not only for our health but for the health of our clients, who are not getting the care and attention they deserve.”

Management refuses to discuss the issue of short-staffing, despite several attempts by the union to raise the issue.

For more information contact UE Local 288 President Ann Burlak at 508-555-1945.

“labor” reporters any more, so you will generally want to send press releases to “business” reporters. Depending on your type of employer, you may also want to send press releases to reporters who cover other beats: a health reporter may be interested in a story about nursing home workers, for example, or an education reporter in a story about school workers. If the outlet does not list their reporters, call them and ask who you should contact when you have a story to tell.

You should also find out their deadline for getting news, especially for television. In the case of newspapers and TV they have cutoff times for “going to press.” If they won’t cover any story after 5:00 pm because they need to get ready to print the newspaper or get ready for the news broadcast, we need to know this. It won’t help to have a demonstration at 5:30 pm if the deadline is 5:00 pm.

Press releases should be emailed to news outlets and reporters. It’s best to send an individual email to each address, but if that is too time-consuming, then copy the list of addresses into the “bcc” (blind carbon-copy) field. That way the re-

ipients will not see the list of who else you are (or are not) sending the press release to.

If you have time, you should also make follow-up calls to each outlet or reporter, to confirm that they received the press release and ask whether they intend to cover your story.

Speaking to the News Media

So, the local has issued a press release and the day of the big demonstration is at hand. What now? Again the key words are BE PREPARED. One or two people should be designated to deal with the press. They should call all the media outlets to make sure someone is coming. At the event they should be armed with printed copies of the press release that was sent out and with some additional quotes or a short “sound bite.” When the press arrives, they should go over and introduce themselves and be prepared to answer any questions.

- Try to keep the statements simple.
- Try to avoid union jargon.
- Present the facts and the union position.
- Don’t give in to a reporter’s pressure to answer something you don’t feel comfortable talking about. If they keep pressing, just say you’ll have to get back to them on that issue, or repeat your basic statement.
- Don’t let the reporter goad you into making rash statements. Don’t say, “The real reason we’re out here is because the boss is a jerk.” Stick to the facts, “We’re out here because management won’t hire enough workers to care for the patients.”
- Repeat yourself when they keep asking questions. “As I said before, the main problem is that management won’t hire enough workers.”

For more detailed information on dealing with the press, see Chapter 7 of the *UE Leadership Guide*.