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[Contents of Issue Menu](#)

Click Here

[Home](#)

**Albany's Newspaper Does What
Most Corporations Would Like to do:
Cancel Their Workers' Contract
Solidarity America
By John Funciello
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The Hearst Corporation's newspaper in New York's capital has cancelled the contract of a union that has had one since the National Labor Relations Act allowed workers to unionize in America. George Hearst, publisher of the *Times Union* in Albany, cancelled the contract of Newspaper Guild Local 34 last week and said that he hoped the cancellation would help bring a speedy resolution to the prolonged contract talks between his company and the union.

In a letter to his paper's readers and advertisers, Hearst claimed that Local 34, an affiliate of the Communications Workers of America, was exaggerating the effects of the company's demands at the bargaining table and the negative effect it would have on the workers and their union.

"The company is hell-bent on wanting to lay off employees, regardless of how loyally they have served and to outsource jobs out of the Capital Region," said Tim O'Brien, a reporter and president of the union, adding, "And because they could not convince our members of the rightness of their cause, they launched an unprecedented attack on our union."

Hearst has done what so many employers in an industry in free fall want to do - get rid of the union. It's as if unionized workers had been making management decisions over the generations and, by crushing them, the papers will miraculously make a come-back and start to make money again.

If he doesn't know that his method of "urging" a quick settlement is an old one, he hasn't read any history. He has acted in a manner befitting a mine owner of the turn of the 19th Century, rather than an "enlightened" newspaper owner of the 21st Century.

Canceling the contract is not a rational act. For decades, Capital Newspapers (the local manifestation of the giant print and broadcast empire of the Hearst Corporation) has negotiated with Local 34 long past the expiration date of the contract. They always worked under the conditions of the contract until a new agreement was reached. It's past practice - long past practice.

Although management at the Albany paper has said that conditions will continue - to a degree - the union sees it as a profound change. For one thing, the company will no longer deduct dues from the paycheck and forward it to the local, so the union will have to set up an alternative to collecting dues.

That's not unprecedented at the *Times Union*, because in the late 1960s, when there was a strike at the Los Angeles *Herald Examiner*, the management at the Albany paper refused to deduct the "assessment" levied on all Guild members at the time, to support the striking workers in L.A.

Hearst in Albany continued to deduct the regular dues, but the lack of an easy way to collect the assessment from 340 members who worked 365 days a year on all three shifts - a plant and business that never slept - caused most of the union members to fall in arrears on their obligations and, therefore, were not "in good standing," not eligible to vote on union issues.

The company's union-busting lawyer (although they weren't called that in those days) knew that such a thing would happen. With most of the union members, in effect, ineligible to vote, the union would be weakened and it was. It took a few years to straighten out the problem, but the company's aims were accomplished - a weaker union. It took years longer to bring it back to life.

Of course, this new-found life in the 1970s was in the context of an American union movement that was itself weakened by a full frontal assault on unions in the 1980s, by corporations and even by the government.

One of the demands of George Hearst in Albany in recent months was that the union accept elimination of seniority, which of course strikes at the heart of any union contract. This is especially true for lay-offs. Long and loyal service - not to mention experience and skills acquired over time - are usually lost, because the company wants to get rid of those very same people who possess all those qualities, who are at the top of the pay scale. It saves money, and that's what it's all about.

The union is looking into legal action, but a canceled contract also means that the union's remaining members can picket, launch a boycott, or strike, although they can't take a grievance to arbitration.

But as Tim O'Brien said, "The reality is this is a union town, and every union member knows what this action means. The *Times Union* can expect the phones to start ringing off the hook with calls canceling the newspaper. We told the Company the day it first threatened this that it was the dumbest thing the Company can do. They ignored us at

their peril. They cannot say they weren't warned."

It's a tough call for both sides. It pains reporters, editors, and all of the other workers in the union to call for a boycott. It's their paper, too. The company is hoping that the local won't be able to pull off a boycott, but, as the local president said, there are lots of union members in the circulation area - tens of thousands of them and most are old enough to still read a newspaper every day - and a boycott could be effective.

The gamble by George Hearst is that the paper will stumble along and just survive in these very tough economic times, even though papers across the country are dropping one after another. What makes him think he can show his contempt for the people who do the work and still have a paper at the end of it all? It is a very big gamble.

A few years ago, when the paper observed its 150th year, its editor, Rex Smith, after he had carefully read the entire issue of the then-*Albany Morning Times* in the archives of the State Library, in 2006 wrote, "...But as I read the founding editor's relentlessly sincere and hopeful words in Vol. 1, No. 1, of the newspaper that I now edit, I got a lump in my throat. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine all the people who had worked hard to create the paper every day over these 150 years, somehow shepherding that little paper along and apparently making the right decisions, year after year, so that even as other newspapers were born and then died, and as other media emerged, the *Times Union* became what is today the region's oldest and by far largest news organization.

"I thought of all the news that had gone through the pages of our paper in these 150 years - family tragedies and political triumphs, natural disasters and awful crimes, tales of heroes and ordinary folks, of war and peace, of great civic deeds that merited celebration and scurrilous doings that would have remained unknown but for this paper's fierce investigative reporters. And I was proud..."

How proud can management be of their hostile act of canceling a contract unilaterally and what it means to the women and men who actually keep the *Times Union* a newspaper and not just an advertising sheet. It's a betrayal of the paper's long history and all of the people who made it a newspaper.

Arbitrary acts such as George Hearst's are happening on a daily basis around the U.S., from widget shops to newspapers. These are warnings to all workers: "Keep your heads down and do the work assigned. Don't make waves and don't question the boss. If you do everything you're told, you may be privileged to be the last one out the door."

Like so many employers at this time of economic stress for the nation, the *Times Union* management is trying to use the turmoil to its advantage, to the detriment or demise of Local 34.

As O'Brien said, "You might as well change the name of the paper to the Times anti-Union."

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BlackCommentator.com Columnist, John Funciello, is a labor organizer and former union organizer. His union work started when he became a local president of The Newspaper Guild in the early 1970s. He was a reporter for 14 years for newspapers in New York State. In addition to labor work, he is organizing family farmers as they struggle to stay on the land under enormous pressure from factory food producers and land developers. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Funciello.

[Contents of Issue Menu](#)

Click Here

[Home](#)

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