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New York: The Newspaper Strike (1978)

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In late 1977 and the first half of 1978, the city room and bureaus of the Daily News were haunted by an ever-darkening spirit. The problem wasn't the daily ritual of murders and mayhem being turned into crisp stories. Though they were our daily bread, these subjects were symptoms of a rot eating at the body of the city's economy and threatening the Sweeneys, our real meal ticket.

The number of newspapers in New York City had been declining for decades. The city's factories, officially called its "manufacturing base," were closing. Gone with the jobs were the robust people who held them. The Sweeneys were growing older and fewer, their more affluent children having moved to Jersey, upstate New York or Long Island, where they read upscale suburban sheets. The new Sweeneys, largely black or Hispanic, had new loyalties and were more likely to listen to radio or watch TV as read the News. The paper's circulation was dropping in response. Inflation, the high costs of doing business in the city and competition with other media for advertising dollars had the Daily News and other papers in a chokehold, threatening to strangle the life out of us all in 1978, when contracts for the 11 unions at the city's three newspapers—the Daily News, New York Times and New York Post—were set to expire.

The first union to run into trouble was the Newspaper Guild, which represented the 4,000 reporters and editorial department employees at the News, Times and Post. The publishers wanted to remove about 700 positions at the three papers from the guild's jurisdiction, lower wages, reduce job numbers and downgrade pay grades.

The New York Post, recently purchased by an Australian publisher Rupert Murdoch, cut a separate deal with its guild members. Murdoch had bought the liberal afternoon tabloid from Dorothy Schiff, who had presided over the Post during its era as the spokesman of liberal, largely Jewish high-mindedness. She had carried the Post and its losses for years and sold it to the most aggressive publisher in the English-speaking world, eager to expand his American holdings.

Murdoch's Post would transform journalism in New York and eventually the United States. Titillation and celebrity scandals, bold headlines crafted to grab the reader for just a day, every day, had long been favored in Australia and Britain and soon would become the standard in New York. Murdoch knew that sensation sold, and furthermore it might be the only news formula to operate urban mass dailies profitably in the new media world. With a few years, the meaning of the word “tabloid” itself would change from describing the physical nature of the half-sheet “tablet”-style newspaper, ideal for subway reading, into a synonym for sensationalism.

Murdoch, in assuming control over the Post, New York magazine and the weekly Village Voice, persuaded the guild in early 1978 that the paper’s survival depended on his ability to reduce costs. The guild agreed, allowing the Post to take a pass and negotiate separately from the News and Times.

The plan within the guild was that Local No. 3, its unit at the News, would carry the lead, with the Times’ guild unit to follow. This meant that guild members at the News would be forced to resort to a strike first if that’s what they decided was necessary. The 750 guild members at the Daily News, including me, voted to let guild leaders call the strike if they failed to get management to budge on its demands. On June 13, 1978, guild leaders called strike. The strike would last just four and a half days, but its intensity proved to be a warm-up for later in the year.

The guild walkout at the News had been authorized by the Allied Printing Trades Council (APTC), the umbrella labor organization for nine unions including stereotypers, pressmen, machinists, photo engravers, editorial and commercial employees. With APTC support, the guild’s action crippled production, but management and other nonunion personnel were able to put out a version of the paper the first night. It turned out that the APTC unions inside the building weren’t enough to shut down publication.

Doug La Chance, of the Mail Deliverers Union—representing the drivers—had said earlier that his members would honor the guild picket line. But when the strike occurred, he ordered his drivers to cross the picket lines and go to work. As a result, the drivers delivered management’s scab paper, effectively keeping their newspaper system operating and eroding the guild’s leverage at the bargaining table.

To do their jobs that first night, drivers maneuvered delivery trucks from the loading bays on East 41st Street through hundreds of striking picketers. Guild members and their APTC allies threw bottles, bricks and stones. One picketer, a small Irish immigrant who worked on the copy desk, climbed on the top of one truck and smashed the wood handle of his picket sign across the vehicle's windshield. Others climbed onto the open side doors of the truck and pummeled the driver, who in panic nearly killed picketers by putting his truck in gear and speeding away, sending his tormentors leaping off the truck to safety. Mounted New York police were needed to contain the melee, and the cops arrested a few guys. I was in the crowd and no hero. I hung back and stayed out of harm's way, along with most of the crowd.

The next day, when the drivers tried to cross the line again, a few strikers attacked one truck, slashing its tires, disabling engine wires and crippling it as it sat in an alley leading to the loading dock on East 41st. After dark, the truck was set ablaze; viewers of the 11 p.m. TV news in the tri-state area saw an image of a burning Daily News truck, proving that a newspaper strike still had some bite in New York City.

After these humiliating confrontations with their brother union members, most drivers now refused to cross the picket line. The membership demanded a vote, which was taken June 15 in the News garage in support of the guild. Drivers left the garage en masse at 10:20 p.m. to cheering strikers outside.

The drivers union's refusal to roll shut down the Daily News. In response, management made an offer on June 16 that guild leaders could live with. The newspaper's guild members met the next day, a Saturday, to vote on the deal. Before the vote, union leadership gave guild members a pep talk, in which the atmosphere was surreal. Rather than being in 1978, I felt as if I'd been transported back in time. The rhetoric was drawn from the 1930s. Even the setting was eerily reminiscent: The guild meeting was at Roosevelt Auditorium in Manhattan's Union Square, for crying out loud.

"You're heroes in New York," APTC President George McDonald was saying, as if warming up working stiffs in the Depression to a lifetime of class struggle. His neck muscles bulged, his arms waved. This skilled rabble-rouser and longtime union leader sold the guild agreement as important to the labor movement. "This is a demonstration of labor unity not seen in New York's newspaper industry since 1963," McDonald told the crowd of a few hundred. I thought this date an ominous benchmark. The unions had shut down the city's newspapers for 114 days in 1962-63, effectively killing four dailies and reducing the numbers of newspapers in New York City from seven to three.

Local No. 3 Chairman Pat Valilla, speaking after McDonald, called the negotiations "the toughest in the history of the guild."

Continuing with the class-war rhetoric suited to a rally in the 1930s, Harry Fisdell, executive vice president of the Newspaper Guild of New York, next said: "This town hasn't seen anything like it in years. I'm convinced Daily News management believed the union would never strike them. Our objective was to keep our contract and our union intact in the face of management retrogressions designed to cut the heart out of the guild and depress working conditions. We had a tough strike, but we protected our contract and maintained our dignity. We showed them there's trade union unity in this town. We showed them New York is a union town still."

The guild union voted 680-30 to approve a new three-year contract. As a member of a union in a life-and-death struggle with management intent on reducing costs, my future was locked in the grip of forces strangling each other. I could do nothing about it. My pay and my job existed because of 40 years of agreements. I was in the guild, and that was all there was to it.

But there was a foul smell about this and it had to do with the dissension within the APTC. The guild's strike upset the timing of the much larger and more muscular pressmen's union. Notwithstanding McDonald's pitch about "heroes of New York," the APTC had forced the settlement, making guild leaders accept a contract that allowed for smaller membership roles and reduced wages.

Now, with the guild checked off the list, the Allied Printing Trades Council and management could get to more significant contracts. Management's bargaining unit, the Publishers Association of New York—representing the publishers of the Times, News and Post, was headed by Murdoch, the Post publisher. The Mail Deliverers and APTC unions needed to replace contracts that had expired earlier that spring. Talks were held at the Doral Inn at 541 Lexington Ave.

The key union was the pressmen, whose numbers were threatened by management demands. William J. Kennedy, president of the New York Printing Pressmen's Union Local No. 2, said that under the publisher's proposal at least 47 percent of the 200 pressmen at the Post and 23 percent of the 960 at the News would face immediate unemployment. The publishers said there were 575 pressmen at the Times, while the union said there were 650. Kennedy claimed up to 50 percent of his 1,600 members would be laid off immediately if management had its way.

The impasse caused the pressmen to strike Aug. 9. This time, nobody crossed any picket lines. The city's three newspapers disappeared, not to publish again until November. Technically, I was employed. In reality, I couldn't go to work because I couldn't bring myself to cross the picket line.

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Following the guild settlement weeks before, my wife and I had taken all we'd saved and could borrow and put a down payment on a small house in Upper Nyack, a village in Rockland County, about 35 miles north of the city. After renting in New York, we wanted a house, with the tax breaks and the possibility of a comfortable life for our children. Lee was almost 5 and Micah almost 3. School loomed. Nyack, on the western end of the Tappan Zee Bridge, seemed to fit the bill, and it had a diverse mix of people. Many New York cops and firemen lived there, as did a lively community of artists, photographers and writers. With my schedule working from 5 p.m. to 1 a.m., it took less than an hour to drive to work.

Now, with a brand-new mortgage, I had a problem. The guild would eventually send strike benefits of about $200 a month, which would help but not much. Sun Oak was a full-time homemaker and mother so the burden was on me to deliver. In the strike's early days, I stayed home, hoping it would be short-lived. No such luck. I tried to pick up work in town in Nyack—checkout boy, gas station attendant, whatever. Nobody was hiring anybody; this was 1978 and economic conditions were slow. I listened to the all news radio stations all the time for news of strike developments. I called pals. But hopes for an early settlement ended within a week. Sun Oak and I spent our days together taking the kids to parks along the Hudson and watched them play with the ducks and geese. These moments were precious, but we knew trouble was gathering. We had emptied our savings to buy the house and move from the city. I had to act.

I got word from friends that reporters were being assembled to work on so-called strike papers. Investors were bankrolling papers to be printed in job shops, where vendors operate print shops to do short run and spot jobs on short-term contracts. These papers would be delivered by the idle jobbers and news delivery agencies that would cut these strike paper publishers a break in order to keep their own people working, albeit at reduced pay. When the strike was settled, these investors would shut down the papers, take their money and call it a day.

I tracked down the details on all three papers. Their investors were shadowy, and information on them scanty. Nobody had wanted to ask too many questions about where these investors came from or who the backers were. One paper, to be called Daily Metro, would take mostly reporters and editors from the Times. It was assembled by a guy in his early twenties named Iseman, who had the look of a rich kid playing with Daddy's money. A second paper, to be called Daily Press, had brother investors named Stein from Detroit, who we heard had put out strike papers elsewhere. The Press, with a mix of Post and Daily News guys, wound up being a Daily News look-alike. A third had a backer nobody knew who called on a guy I'd worked closely with on the midtown series to gather Daily News hands and put out a knockoff called City News.

I tried to land a job by telephone calling my news pals, but realized my phone calls were easy to avoid and not returned. Talk's always cheap. Turning down a pal in person would be harder. So I got up early Monday, Aug. 21, as the strike was entering its third week. Sun Oak was up with me and prepared a solid breakfast of eggs, toast and coffee.

Sun Oak, as she always had, remained calm and confident. The kids were holding on to her as we said goodbye at the front door. I saw her in the rearview mirror, still standing in the doorway watching me as I drove away.

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I found the City News in a set of offices in a nearly empty midtown building just off Park Avenue. The furniture was hit-or-miss, with serviceable tables and chairs arranged in a large U shape around the room. There was a lot of noise and confusion, with a small but obviously busy staff. The phone company had just installed a set of phones, and nearly all were in use. Typewriters rented from a nearby office supply outfit clacked the familiar sound. These guys were of a somewhat older generation of Daily News veterans. I could tell rewrite guys were talking with reporters in police headquarters and the courthouses downtown and in Brooklyn and Queens.

The City News had already put out its first edition. It was laid out just like the Daily News to attract the same readers on the newsstands. The trouble with the paper was that the investor had chosen the editor based on name recognition, not talent. The City News editor had been a legendary legman, but not a writer or editor; the staff he had assembled reflected his narrower knowledge and lack of editing depth.

He'd heard I was coming, and when I came into the room he waved me over. I went to the shabby office table in the center of the empty office that was being converted into a make shift newsroom. I stood across from him. He kept answering the phone at his right hand while I stood there obviously looking for the nod. He had already put 35 guys on the payroll; one more dog he knew would hunt was easy, I figured.

"Yeah, Tommy," he was saying between calls. "I heard you were looking. "

He was distracted, he was busy, he told me he didn't know what he could do. He wouldn't look at me square. This was a kiss-off, that's all there was to it. I could hardly believe it. We'd worked tight on midtown stuff. We'd kept each other's secrets, knew each other weaknesses and had kept them to ourselves. He and I knew the code. I was listening now and was stunned to watch him not do what he could. This was an act of betrayal he knew I would not take any other way. He'd refused to toss a pound in a basket of cheer.

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From a pay phone on Park, I called a guy I knew at the Daily Press. The editor was Don Flynn, a Manhattan court reporter and playwright, who had chosen as his No. 2 a guy named Phil Roura. Before the strike, the pair had been put in charge of a new "people" page at the News, which featured photos and captions showing off celebrities of one sort or another. It became one of the most widely read pages in the paper. Roura was gracious but said he was filled up. He suggested I get to the Daily Metro quick; he'd heard they had a bunch of Times guys who wanted to take vacation, not work.

I found the Daily Metro office on the second floor of a building on East 47th Street in the anteroom of a printing job shop. This was a going place, not a temporary anything. It had small working cubicles with windows, calendars on the walls, desks with personal effects, and mature brown wood paneling and red rugs. It was crowded with people I didn't recognize, Times guys.

At the door with perhaps a dozen other supplicants, I stood in line for about 10 minutes and got my bearings. Though in business just one day, the Metro was already overwhelmed with publicists, advertisers, promoters, vendors and other newspaper flotsam. Presiding over this confusion was a blond young man named Jeff Schmalz, who seemed to be in charge, standing behind a waist-high customer greeting desk designed to take orders. Slight and youthful looking, Schmalz had a confident, commanding way about him, although I would not have thought this at first glance. I later learned Schmalz was an assistant metro editor at the Times and considered one of its stars. Years later he would mature into a distinguished reporter and editor at the Times and command the nation's attention when he wrote of his battle with AIDS before his death in 1994.

I watched Schmalz fend off a well-tanned and decked-out young man from Long Island who wanted to get a photo of himself and his bride in the Metro. He believed his wedding and the reception that followed had been of such importance to Island society that they required a story and photo feature. Hearing this stuffed shirt pled his case, I knew this was an operating news office, all right. I felt right at home.

"I'm sorry," Schmalz said, after arguing with the young man for a few moments, "I can't help you. This is not something we will pursue."

As I waited my turn to talk with Schmalz, a Times reporter I recognized came in behind me. His name was Rich Meislin. We had covered a press conference together in Rep. Liz Holtzman's office in Brooklyn couple of years before when she was investigating the summer lunch program. Meislin was new to the story at that time, and as a courtesy I gave him background information he would need to understand it better. He could have gotten the same material from a trip to the Times morgue, but I saved him the time. I also drove him back to Manhattan, saving him a cab ride. No big deal. He recognized me, and we reintroduced ourselves. As a Times guy, Meislin had already been signed up to work for the Metro.

"You're looking for work?" he asked.

"Do me a favor here, will you?"

"What are you good at?"

"I'm the best rewrite man at the News."

This obvious lie was said for effect, to make the point that I could turn out copy, do what this paper needed—if I got a job. Meislin held up his finger to indicate I should wait there, as he walked behind the counter and whispered to Schmalz. They spoke briefly for a moment. Meislin pointed at me, and Schmalz looked over and gave me a nod.

Minutes later Schmalz said he needed me to work on spot news. I was asked to craft only one story that day but drove home satisfied with my work and that the $250 a week from the Daily Metro would save us. Sun Oak greeted me as I opened the front door to our new home. When she heard what had happened, we embraced each other for a good long time as the kids played at our feet.

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It took me a few days to get used to the pace of the Times guys at the Daily Metro. They were utterly competent but spent a lot of time on editing and checking things that at the Daily News we got right the first time or else! I also had been in the habit of working more stories at once, say, doing a fire in Brooklyn, following up a robbery in Queens and maybe doing a rewrite on a press release out of some city councilman's office—all at once, at such a pace that all three stories would be covered, checked and written by deadline. Most of the Times guys stayed with one story and didn't concern themselves too much if the story had to wait until the next day to finish. I also was comfortable with spot police reporting and did five- and six-paragraph stories quickly. It helped in this new job that there were Daily News reporters at police headquarters and court pressrooms working for the other two strike papers. When I called looking for information, they gave it to me, no problem. This was a professional fraternity at work.

Schmalz went out of his way to make sure the only Daily News guy on the Metro felt welcome. He was complimentary of my work and even suggested that I work for the Times after the strike. The idea had appeal. I'd gone to Columbia, after all, which held up the Times as the newspaper icon. And I'm not above listening to someone who thinks my work is good. But given the cross-town rivalry and competitive ethic of the papers at that time, such a leap seemed unlikely, and I said as much. Schmalz was gracious but said he was serious nonetheless.

I gauged how the Daily Metro was doing by listening to stories picked up on WCBS News Radio 88 on the drive to and from work every day, leaving home by 6 a.m. and heading out after the 6 p.m. copy deadline. It didn't take too long for the strike papers to become credible sources for others in the New York media, as well as being stories in and of themselves. My routine became so regular that I would hear the 7 a.m. news on WCBS just as I was in the crowd of rush-hour traffic crossing the George Washington Bridge from Fort Lee, N.J., into the city.

On Wednesday, Sept. 6, I was just leaving the bridge and entering the maze of tunnels that burrow under the buildings on the Manhattan side when the WCBS anchorman said: "Top editors of strike paper Daily Metro resign as Murdoch disclosed as secret owner."

The signal was interrupted as the highway carried my car through the tunnels leading to the Harlem River Parkway. By the time I pulled into a parking slot near the Metro office on 47th Street, I had heard what I needed. It turned out that Murdoch had lent Iseman, the 25-year old publisher of the Daily Metro, several hundred thousand dollars to keep his strike paper afloat. As head of the publishers association, Murdoch had agreed to let the Metro use the Post's home delivery network to sell 150,000 of the Metro's press run of 450,000. He also agreed to advance Iseman cash equal to the first week's sales. Iseman, in return, agreed to sell Murdoch the name of the paper after the strike ended.

I went to the Metro's office and found the Times reporters and editors milling around, as confused by the situation as I was. Within a half-hour, the issue had become clear. Despite the consequences of quitting the paper, this was an impossible situation for a guild member. How could we work for a strike paper being secretly bankrolled by the publisher against whom the guild was withholding work? A few editors tried to push off a final decision about leaving, but I walked out early. Without delay I walked over to a phone booth on 3rd Avenue and called Phil Roura at the Daily Press downtown.

"Sure," he said, "when I heard about the Metro I told Flynn I know a guy we got to grab!"

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I was hired the afternoon of Sept. 6 and spent the remaining two months of the strike working in a makeshift newsroom, an industrial loft in the shadow of the World Trade Center in lower Manhattan. At the Daily Press I found a newspaper dream: reporting, editing, rewrite and the chance to grab a piece of as many stories as any news guy could want, in every edition. Flynn and Roura were great guys who ran a great news sheet. There were about 25 of us, give or take a few depending on vacations, money and whims. When the strike was over, most of us agreed our time at the Press had been the complete newspaper experience. There was an intensity to the work, an immediacy to the reporting, editing and news decisions. Nearly a half million people read the paper every day. And there were no office politics. There was only the story and the paper. What made it so bittersweet, and ultimately precious, was that we all knew it would end.

Midway through October, I got a call from Sam Roberts, who was still reporting to work every day at the Daily News on East 42nd. As city editor, Roberts was miserable, like most of the editors in management at the Daily News. Some guild members had crossed the picket line and had kept their paychecks, but as the weeks dragged on it became obvious to them that they would have a hard time staying on after the strike was over. Resentments ran high. One labor reporter who'd crossed the line left the paper mid-strike and went to work as the press secretary to New York Governor Hugh Carey, a job he didn't keep long. Others took similar actions. But one result of this period of change was that the Daily News was organizing itself for the future, after the strike.

Roberts called a few guys to talk about the jobs they might want when they came back. When he got hold of me, I asked what he wanted.

“We want to make you an assistant city editor, you stupid fuck!”

Though crudely stated, his encouragement came with genuine affection and conveyed the appropriate level of formality for the Daily News. I was honored.

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Murdoch parted company with the publishers association in late September when the Post cut a separate “me, too” deal with the pressmen and the 10 other unions in the Allied Printing Trades Council, meaning he would go back to work without a contract but accept whatever the other two papers got. Labor mediator Theodore Kheel, brought in as a fact-finder representing the 8,400 non-striking union members idled by the strike of the 1,500-member pressmen’s union, said the Post was getting a “free ride.” After our colleagues from the Post returned to work, most of us from the News and Times agreed!

Of course, this meant the demise, on Oct. 4, of the Daily Metro, which survived the loan disclosure of a month before with certain hands-off guarantees by Murdoch to those willing to stay on. The New York Post resumed publication the next day. It turned out that me leaving the Daily Metro for the Daily Press had been a blessing.

Kheel led the pressmen and the publishers through two marathon sessions, one of 27 hours ending Oct. 31, followed by a break and another 22 hours straight. The pressmen and publishers reached agreement Nov. 2; the other unions followed in the next few days.

The Daily Press folded Friday, Nov. 3, and word got around that everybody was to return to work, which I did that Sunday. I sat at the city desk as assistant city editor, working with Roberts and the other editors. Editor Mike O’Neill hovered around as the front page of Monday morning’s edition was put together. The Page 1 story was slugged Strike.

“Hey, all you experts,” O’Neill said to nobody in particular, “how many days was the strike?”

Several editors got out their pencils and began to do the arithmetic. O’Neill found no math experts around him. Finally he looked over at me.

“Tommy,” O’Neill said, “Make it right, because it’s going on Page 1.”

I worked the numbers a few times, recalling Clendenin's warming about union guys and their inability to count.

"I make it 88 days," I said.