

# Sinclair merger could lead to TV news layoffs

IATSE warns local TV news will worsen if FCC allows Sinclair takeover

International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) is raising the alarm about the proposed acquisition of Tribune Media by Sinclair Broadcast Group. Sinclair, with 173 television stations, is already the biggest station owner in the nation, and adding Tribune's 42 stations would extend its reach considerably.

Until recently, the merger would have been illegal under Federal Communications Commission (FCC) rules that try to limit concentrated ownership of licenses to use the publicly-owned broadcast spectrum. Those rules bar any one company from owning stations that reach more than 39 percent of the American public total. Sinclair-Tribune would reach 72 percent.

But the agency has turned the rules upside down under Trump-appointed FCC chair Ajit Pai, in a way calculated to facilitate the merger. To begin with, the FCC reinstated a rule that counts only half the potential audience of UHF stations as compared to VHF stations. That rule dated from the days of analog television, when UHF stations (Ultra High Frequency) assigned Channels 14 and up were the static-plagued down-market cousins of VHF (Very High Frequency) stations, which were assigned channels 2 to 13. Today, that's a meaningless and obsolete technical distinction, because all commercial television stations are broadcast as digital signals in the UHF frequency range.

Even with that rule change, Sinclair-Tribune would reach 45 percent of American households, so Ajit's FCC proposes

## Prepare to be outraged

What happens to local news when Sinclair comes to town? HBO's Last Week Tonight with John Oliver aired a hard-hitting 19-minute segment on Sinclair July 2 — which has since racked up 6.3 million views on YouTube: [youtu.be/GvtNyOzGogc](https://youtu.be/GvtNyOzGogc)



to approve the merger on the promise that the new company would sell stations until it met the 39 percent limit.

IATSE Local 600 rep Dave Twedell is concerned that members' jobs will be lost in consolidation and as Sinclair replaces local news with national content. Sinclair owns Portland's KATU and Seattle's KOMO, and in union bargaining is refusing to commit that local studios will stay open and continue to produce news.

"If Sinclair is successful in this merger," Twedell says, "it would put immense pressure on others to take same approach — cost-cutting, centralizing, job losses, and service losses to the community that tune into the TV shows."

IATSE is just one of an array of groups opposed to the merger. For some others, the issue is Sinclair's history of mandating that local TV news shows air nationally-produced conservative commentary segments. The company at times even dictates at a national level what local TV anchors must say. No other station owner does that. Even Fox, noted for the slant of its cable news network, gives local affiliates relative autonomy. Producing local news is what satisfies the FCC's public service requirement, the justification for letting broadcast TV stations sell ads on publicly owned airwaves.

## WORKERS' RIGHTS

# Precision Castparts still refusing to recognize Machinist union

The Sept. 22 union election was supervised by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). The vote was 54 to 38 in favor of joining the union. The federal agency certified the result Oct. 2.

But Precision Castparts Corp., is refusing to recognize the results of the election, bargain with Machinists District Lodge W24, or respect employees' most basic union rights, like the federally-recognized "Weingarten" right to have a steward or fellow worker present when a worker goes in front of a manager in a disciplinary meeting. Instead, the company is hoping a new Trump-appointed NLRB majority will vindicate its lawlessness.

Precision Castparts, a subsidiary of Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway, is a maker of cast parts for aerospace, medical, nuclear and other industries. It's fought hard to remain nonunion in the Portland area, and defeated multiple union campaigns in the past.

This time, the union sought an election for just one unit — rework welders.

Precision Castparts argues that the NLRB was wrong to say welders could stand on their own

as a bargaining unit. It's an argument that went all the way to the NLRB's five-member national board, where it was rejected in September. Now Precision is asking the Board to review its decision, knowing that the Board has changed composition and now has an anti-union majority.

"Their stance is they won't meet with us until they hear back from the NLRB," says Machinists Grand Lodge Representative Bill Anderson.

Meanwhile, Anderson says the company is also bringing in a dozen or more subcontracted welders. Anderson says employees are reporting that PCC has been sending its own employees home for lack of work while subcontractors toil seven days a week with overtime.

The Machinists union has filed six separate complaints with the NLRB, alleging multiple violations of federal labor law since the union election took place. The violations include the denial of Weingarten rights, making unilateral changes to working conditions without bargaining with the union, and refusing to recognize the union, furnish requested information, or bargain in good faith.

The union held an informational picket Nov. 14 (after this issue went to press) to let the public know what is happening at the facility.

"We're following everything by the letter of the law," Anderson told the *Labor Press*. "These guys took a vote. They want to be represented by the Machinists union."

Amid the stonewalling from Precision, prounion welders did get one morale boost: A letter from U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley congratulating them on voting in the union: "The ability to bargain for safe working conditions and fair pay and benefits is a fundamental right in our society," Merkley wrote. "Thank you for the work you do to keep America moving, and best of luck as you bargain your first contract."

The company may not "recognize" the Machinists, but the union is keen on defending members anyway. One example: Urging employees to get screened for exposure to hexavalent chromium, a heavy metal that can cause cancer in the digestive tract and lungs, which has been an ongoing problem at Precision.



**Thomas Mitchell**  
Regional Sales Director  
Taft-Hartley Services

OneAmerica Retirement Services, LLC  
a ONEAMERICA® company  
15 Robbins Lane  
Lakeville, MA 02347  
Main: (508) 923-3452  
Cell: (339) 309-9590  
[thomas.mitchell@OneAmerica.com](mailto:thomas.mitchell@OneAmerica.com)



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