

'Seizing the memes of production'

A tidal wave of union organizing is sweeping the media

By Don McIntosh

Too many writers chasing too few jobs. A culture of short-timers building personal brands and looking for the next big thing. A newsroom full of college-educated young people, paid partly in stock, who identify with management. That's why online media was—and would likely remain—non-union, said a January 2015 Washington Post article entitled, "Why Internet journalists don't organize."

How wrong that turned out to be. Within months, an explosion of union organizing had begun in online media that's still going strong four years later.

The union wave started with online tabloid **Gawker**, where workers notified management of their support for Writers Guild of America (WGA) on April 16, 2015, and proved it in an 80-to-27 union vote six weeks later.

Strictly speaking, **Gawker**



wasn't the first unionized online media organization. **Truthout** had unionized in 2009 and **In These Times** in 2014. But both were outliers—progressive nonprofits that relied on liberal good will, and even union financial support in the case of *In These Times*. Meanwhile, workers at

the **Daily Beast** news and opinion site had become union almost by accident when their employer merged in 2011 with NewsGuild-CWA-represented *Newsweek*, and stayed union when *Daily Beast* became independent again.

Gawker going union was

something else entirely.

"When **Gawker** unionized, it was a light bulb in the heads of a lot of people in our industry," says writer Hamilton Nolan, one of the leaders of the union effort there. "Media is a pretty small world. People talk to each other. It was something a lot of people

hadn't considered before."

By the end of 2015, **Salon**, **Huffington Post** and **The Guardian's** U.S. edition had unionized, followed by progressive sites **ThinkProgress** and **Jacobin** in 2016, and **Thrillist**, **The Intercept**, **Vice Media**, and the multi-site company **Vox Media** in 2017.

And that was just the beginning. At least nine other marquee media names unionized in 2018, and a dozen more so far this year.

And the wave spread to print. In January 2018 workers at the **Los Angeles Times** voted 248-44 to unionize, for the first time in the paper's 137-year history. **The Chicago Tribune** followed in May 2018, recognizing a union for the first time in its 171 years after more than 85 percent of its 280 journalists signed cards. Since then a dozen daily newspapers in Maryland, Vir-

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A TRICKLE, THEN A FLOOD

Ars Technica workers demanded union recognition March 29, 2019, and Condé Nast agreed to it on May 21. A news site about the scientific and technical world, its staff is entirely remote, so it's the first digital media company to unionize workers located throughout the country without any central physical workplace.

Buzzfeed workers signed cards and announced their union on Feb. 12, 2019.

Workers at three Maryland newspapers — **Capital Gazette**, the **Carroll County Times** and the **Baltimore Sun Media Group** — won voluntary union recognition from their employer in December 2018.

Casper Star-Tribune workers, in Casper, Wyoming, approved their first-ever collective bargaining agreement on Dec. 14, 2018.

Chicago Tribune workers won voluntary union recognition from their employer after more than 85 percent of the 280-person newsroom signed cards.

Workers at the **Daily Hampshire Gazette** and **Valley Advocate** in Northampton, Mass., voted Dec. 12, 2018 to unionize.

The Dodo editorial and video staff unionized in April 2018 and ratified a first contract in December. It's a site devoted to animal videos.

Fast Company voluntarily recognized its workers union on July 26, 2018, and signed a first contract July 23, 2019.

Florida Times-Union workers announced their union in June 2018, following in the footsteps of workers at two other papers owned by GateHouse Media — **Lakeland Ledger** and the **Sarasota Herald-Tribune** who unionized in 2016.

Fortune digital journalists announced their union March 29, 2019. The print side of the magazine has long been unionized.

Gawker workers announced their union June 3, 2015, then voted 80 to 27 to unionize, and ratified their first contract in 2016.

Gimlet Media which produces more than two dozen podcasts, became the first podcasting company to unionize when management agreed to recognize the union in May 2019.

Guardian US edition workers voted 45-0 to unionize on June 30, 2015, and ratified their first contract in September 2017.

Hartford Courant newspaper workers in Hartford, Connecticut, won voluntary recognition from owner Tribune Publishing on Feb. 16, 2019.

Huffington Post voluntarily recognized its workers union in 2015 and ratified its first union contract January 2017.

In These Times workers unionized at their progressive non-profit employer in 2014.

The Intercept online investigative site

recognized its workers union in April 2017, 4/17 and signed its first union contract in July 2018.

Jacobin staff unionized in October 2016 and signed a first union contract January 2018.

Law360 editorial staffers voted 109 to 9 to unionize in August 2016, and approved a first contract in December 2018. A subsidiary of LexisNexis, the site reports on legal matters.

Los Angeles Times workers voted 248-44 to unionize in January 2018.

Mic voluntarily recognized its workers union in March 2018. But after Bustle Digital Group bought the company in December 2018, it laid off all the workers and moved to produce with freelancers and managers.

Morning Call workers in Allentown, Pennsylvania voted 31-12 on March 19, 2019 to unionize and are allying with other units of Chicago-based Tribune Publishing Co. to try to win a first contract.

New Republic workers unionized in April 2018 and are currently in bargaining.

New York magazine workers won voluntary union recognition Feb. 1, 2019 for 180 workers at the magazine and all of its respective online verticals — **Vulture**, **the Cut**, **Intelligencer**, **Grub Street**, and the **Strategist**.

New Yorker magazine voluntarily recognized its workers union in June 2018.

Omaha World Herald workers in Omaha, Nebraska voted 71-5 to unionize in October 2018.

The Onion workers went public with their union on April 20, 2018 (4/20) with an announcement appropriate for the satirical magazine: "It's Official: Onion Inc.'s Groveling, Ungrateful Staffers Unionize!" The union includes workers at the A.V. Club, ClickHole, The Takeout, Onion Labs, and Onion Inc.'s art and video departments. They're still trying to win a first contract.

Pitchfork workers announced their union March 29, 2019, and Condé Nast agreed to recognize it on May 21.

Refinery29 voluntarily recognized its workers union Jan. 25, 2019. The female-focused site covers news, fashion, beauty, entertainment, and wellness.

Salon.com workers voted to unionize in 2015, and ratified their first collective bargaining agreement in November 2018.

Slate workers voted 45-7 to unionize in January 2018 and won their first contract in December.

Talking Points Memo workers announced their union in May 2018 and ratified their first union contract May 30, 2019.

ThinkProgress news site signed its first union contract in June 2016, and a second contract in January 2019.

Thrillist workers voted 56-3 to unionize in March 2017, and ratified their first union contract October 2018.

Time magazine digital workers announced their union April 25, 2019, won union recognition June 7, and began bargaining July 30.

Truthout, a nonprofit progressive website, unionized in 2009 and has been union ever since.

Vice Media granted voluntary union recognition for its 430 employees in September 2017 and signed its first union contract in March 2019.

Owner Tronc recognized a union in September 2018 for over 100 workers at the **Virginian-Pilot**, **Daily Press**, **Virginia Gazette**, and **Tidewater Review**, four Virginia newspapers.

Vox Media agreed November 2017 to recognize a union for the 400 employees at all its online media outlets: **Curbed**, **Eater**, **Recode**, **SB Nation**, **Racked**, **Polygon**, **The Verge** and **Vox**. The two sides reached agreement on a first contract in June 2019.

Wirecutter editorial staff announced a union in April 2019. Owner New York Times agreed to recognize it July 1. The site reports on and reviews gear and gadgets.

Ziff Davis agreed in December 2018 to recognize a union at **Mashable**, **Geek.com**, **AskMen**, and **PC Magazine**.