Second Opinions

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Don't Mourn. Publicize.

According to *New York Times* media columnist Ben Smith, labor has suddenly become a "hot news beat." Smith suggested several reasons for this new status. Strikes and organizing campaigns against some of the country's most prominent employers have captured public attention. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed widespread discontent in the workplace. And a new generation of journalists has emerged that is committed to writing about labor issues.

This outpouring of labor coverage offers important lessons for unions.

For years, many of us in the union movement have complained about biased coverage from corporately controlled media. We have also lamented the lack of journalists who understand labor issues. However, I am convinced these obstacles can be overcome. From my earliest days in the labor movement, the unions I worked for often received favorable news coverage. We got it by taking visible actions such as boycotts, strikes, and organizing campaigns that proved difficult for the media to ignore. We developed long-term relationships with journalists. And we established ourselves as reliable sources of stories worth covering.

Even before the recent wave of union activity, we were seeing more media attention to labor. In 2011, mass protests opposed attempts to roll back workers' rights in Wisconsin. Occupy Wall Street made economic inequality an issue that gained serious press coverage. Later, teachers' strikes swept the nation, beginning with the Chicago Teachers Union walkout in 2012 and continuing with the "Red for Ed" strikes. These strikes featured shrewd messaging such as "teacher working conditions are student learning conditions" and "the schools our students deserve." Often, teachers told compelling personal stories that provided additional insights about these messages.

We've witnessed similar creative labor actions closer to home. Scabby the Rat has become a well-known symbol of unfair labor practices at construction sites. The Rosie the Riveter brigade that appeared during UFCW Local 555's 2019 negotiations with Fred Meyer presented a powerful story about wage structures that treated women unfairly.

Of course, as former *New York Times* labor reporter Steven Greenhouse recently observed, "There's a big story the media usually misses about unions—how, concretely, they improve workers' lives." Unions provide higher wages, predictable scheduling, affordable health care, apprenticeship opportunities, and a strong voice on the job. Because those stories lack the drama of the picket line, it will take more work to get the media to tell them. However, the pandemic has created the opportunity for us to highlight how a union job permits "essential work" to occur under conditions of dignity, respect, and safety.

I don't mean to suggest that the media will always pay attention or give labor a fair shake. However, I am confident we can get our stories told more often and more fairly if we are persistent, creative, and cultivate relationships with journalists. Most importantly, we must continue to produce activities worth covering. To rephrase Joe Hill's final words: "Don't mourn. Publicize."

Jordan Cove

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But it was not to be. From the beginning, Jordan Cove and its pipeline were opposed by environmental groups, tribes, and some local landowners. Seeing that opposition, almost no state or federal elected leaders were publicly supportive of the project, and some were publicly opposed. U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley came out against it in December 2017, saying that project sponsors had dropped earlier assurances that the project wouldn't use eminent domain against property owners who didn't want the pipeline, and that the terminal would be powered by renewable energy. Merkley also opposed it on the grounds that that natural gas escaping from fracking fluids and gas pipelines would make it at least as carbon-polluting as coal.

Meanwhile, state and federal regulators found grounds to deny required permits. For the project to move forward it would need approvals from FERC, the U.S. Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Coast Guard, Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), Department of State Lands, and the Oregon Energy Facility Siting Council.

FERC rejected Jordan Cove's application to build the pipeline and terminal in 2016. Jordan Cove appealed that rejection. Then in March 2020, FERC commissioners appointed by Donald Trump approved the project 2-1, and gave it the right to use eminent domain—so long as Jordan Cove obtained required permits from the state. But DEQ denied a water quality permit, which it would need for a pipeline that was expected to cross hundreds of rivers, streams and wetlands. Pembina asked FERC to overrule DEQ, but it declined.

"It's really disappointing to see that we couldn't get approval for a project that would have created thousands of good jobs for the Southwest Coast and the region," said Oregon State Building Trades Council executive secretary Robert Camarillo. "Unlike some other developers, this was a developer that was willing to use local skilled workers."

PIPE DREAMS

Jordan Cove is the latest of a series of proposed Pacific Northwest fossil fuel infrastructure projects in which developers promised to use union labor, and got union political and community support, but were unable to get regulatory approval to build. Previously scrapped projects include:

- **VANCOUVER, 2014-2018** Vancouver Energy, a joint venture by Tesoro Refining & Marketing Company and Savage Companies proposed to invest $210 million to build what would be the largest oil terminal in America at the Port of Vancouver, and then to transport 131 million barrels of crude oil per year by train from the Bakken Shale oil fields of North Dakota and Montana through the Columbia Gorge. But the state Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council denied Tesoro necessary permits to build the facility, and the Port of Vancouver canceled the project's lease after voters elected a Port commissioner who opposed the terminal.
- **LONGVIEW, 2012-2017** Millennium Bulk Terminals LLC, a joint venture by Ambre Energy and Arch Coal proposed to invest $680 million to construct a coal export facility in Longview, Washington, on the site of a Reynolds Aluminum smelter that closed in 2000. But the Washington Department of Ecology denied a necessary water quality permit. In 2020 Wyoming and Montana tried to sue Washington state, but in June 2021 the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear their lawsuit.
- **PORTLAND, 2014-2016** Pembina Pipeline Corp. proposed to invest $500 million to build a propane export facility at the Port of Portland's Terminal 6, drawing on liquid propane transported by train from Canada for shipment to Asia. It would have been the largest single private capital investment in the city's history. But the company needed a zoning amendment in order to construct a pipe, and then-mayor Charlie Hales refused to schedule a hearing on that. Portland City Council later passed a resolution barring construction of any additional fossil fuel infrastructure in Portland.
- **MORROW, 2012-2016** Coyote Island Terminal LLC, a subsidiary of Australia-based Ambre Energy, proposed to invest $242 million to build a dock at the Port of Morrow near Boardman. The dock would allow it to bring 8.8 million tons of coal per year by train from the Powder River Basin in Wyoming and Montana and load it onto covered barges to ship it down the Columbia River to Port Westward, where it would be transferred onto ships bound for Asia. But the company needed a permit to place 572 cubic yards of fill in order to place pilings needed to support the dock. The Oregon Department of State Lands denied the permit, saying the company hadn't done enough to analyze alternatives that would avoid harming tribal fisheries. The company, the Port of Morrow, and the State of Wyoming challenged the denial but lost in court.
- **ST. HELENS, 2012-2013** Houston based energy infrastructure company Kinder Morgan proposed to invest $200 million in a coal export terminal at Port Westward Industrial Park at the Port of St. Helens, and then bring 15 million tons of coal a year by rail from the Powder River Basin in Wyoming and Montana for export to Asia. But PGE decided not to sublease its port acreage to Kinder Morgan out of concern that coal dust would affect the operation of two nearby natural gas plants, and backers were unable to find another parcel at the Port.