**Bytes**

Buffalo Wins First Raise in Seven Years

Members of the Guild at The Buffalo News ratified a new two-year contract in April that provides a much-needed boost in wages for the first time in seven years. The agreement also beat back several damaging proposals from management.

But it wasn’t all good news. The agreement includes some cost-sharing for the Guild base health plan, although employees may select less expensive plans without cost sharing but with higher deductibles.

More significantly, the contract allows the company to outsource the Classified Advertising Department. However, the bargaining team ultimately negotiated a strong severance package for employees who will lose their jobs: one year of health care coverage and one year’s severance pay.

Cutline:

Guild members march through the office of The Buffalo News in an effort to win a fair deal.

Erie Ratifies First Contract

Eighteen months after GateHouse Media purchased the Erie Times-News, members of the Guild voted overwhelmingly to ratify an agreement for an initial three-year contract. The Guild also resolved several unfair labor practice (ULP) charges the union had filed with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB).

Prior to the January 2016 sale, the union was actively negotiating a contract with the previous owners, the Mead family. But GateHouse refused to accept the collective bargaining relationship that had been in place for more than 80 years.

Company representatives held meetings with employees where they outlined new conditions of employment and gave employees just a few days to decide whether they would accept them. Those who declined were considered to have resigned.

The Guild filed a ULP in July 2016, asserting that as the “perfectly clear successor” employer of all of the Times-News’ employees, GateHouse was prohibited from unilaterally changing the terms of employment. The Guild demanded that GateHouse reinstate the terms of the contract.

That was a no go, as the new managers planned to subcontract bargaining unit work and lay off employees.

While the charges were being prepared, Guild and management reps negotiated an interim agreement.

The March 2016 agreement included some provisions of the contract with the Mead family — a grievance and arbitration procedure; just cause provisions, and severance pay to more than 15 employees whose jobs had been subcontracted. The following month, the parties began negotiating a full contract.

In September, the Guild filed additional ULP charges protesting the employer’s failure to negotiate over wages above established minimums; refusal to pay step-up increases; failure to bargain over a voluntary separation offer, and for engaging in direct dealing with employees. The NLRB filed two complaints against GateHouse on Nov. 8, 2016. Subsequently GateHouse proposed a settlement to the Guild, which was based on the contract with the previous owners.

The ensuing agreement provided substantial financial relief to the 70 members of the bargaining unit who had not seen wage increases in as many as eight years.

The estimated value of the settlement was approximately $2.8 million, including $597,000 in lump-sum payments to current unit members and subcontracted employees and another $2.25 million in restored benefits.

The union anticipated that if settlement talks proved fruitless, the NLRB hearing would impose significant financial liabilities on the employer. That threat leveraged a bit of cooperation.

The three-year contract was ratified on May 30.

CPD’s First Contract

The 36 members of the Washington-Baltimore NewsGuild at the Center for Popular Democracy voted unanimously to ratify their first Guild contract on Feb. 17. The agreement features a 3 percent raise each year.

In addition to wage increases, the contract includes significant advances for Guild members: annual pay-equity evaluations, cost-of-living adjustments, paid family leave, a union-shop clause, and grievance and arbitration procedures.

Dayton Agreement

After stop-and-start negotiations, members of the Dayton Editorial Units ratified a new two-year contract in March covering newsroom employees at the Dayton Daily News and the Springfield News-Sun.

Quite a bit has changed since the last set of negotiations, making this round of bargaining especially difficult: The combined units are now comprised of 22 people, down from 57 in 2014; the two Guild newsroom units are a minority of a blended newsroom — supporting three daily newspapers and broadcast media, and in 2016 the company decimated the copy desk unit through massive layoffs that affected local officers.

The agreement includes bumps to the minimum pay of more than 10 percent, though wages are still quite low.

One of the most contentious non-economic issues was “just cause” protection. Guild negotiators demanded and won a provision that includes a specific reference to the seven commonly accepted tests of just cause.

Wage Parity in Kenosha

Kenosha Newspaper Guild negotiators had a mandate when they began bargaining with management at the Kenosha News: Members wanted wage parity.

They wanted an end to pay rates that were extremely out-of-date and that had little relationship to their experience. When bargaining began, wages had not been increased in more than a decade, and weekly pay for employees doing the same jobs often differed by more than $100.

Despite a difficult bargaining environment, union negotiators made substantial progress on parity, in exchange for give backs in vacation, severance, shift differentials, and overtime pay.

The pay scales were modified to add another year of experience and $140 to the weekly top minimum rate, an increase of 17.5 percent, with all 26 newsroom employees receiving wage increases or lump sum bonuses.

The Guild team — comprised mostly of first-time negotiators — retained many benefits the employer had proposed to cut. Members of the newsroom-only unit ratified the two-year contract on March 29.

Lakeland Gets a First

After an enthusiastic union organizing campaign last year, members of the Lakeland Guild unit of CWA Local 3108 ratified an interim Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) in April — their first formal agreement with their new employer, GateHouse Media. When a full collective bargaining agreement is reached, the terms of the MOA will be included.

Company representatives initiated the move to an interim agreement because they wanted to negotiate over three issues: scheduling, hiring and layoffs. Other Guild locals have used management’s interest in those items as leverage to demand bargaining over any changes to initial terms of employment established by the new owners.

Negotiations resulted in the addition of four annual personal days; minimum wage rates that permit the company to pay higher amounts; job classifications for covered employees, and the requirement that any layoffs be done in reverse order of seniority — although the company has the right to skip up to two employees in each job classification in each round of layoffs.

The agreement also allows members of the bargaining unit to participate in a company-wide bonus plan under the same terms as managerial and other non-represented personnel.

The bargaining team also reached agreement on a grievance procedure and a “just cause” provision — a refreshing new concept for workers who were previously “at will” employees.

Sarasota MOA

Members of the Sarasota Guild unit of CWA Local 3108 ratified a Memorandum of Agreement covering the implementation of layoffs in February after management at the Herald-Tribune opened contract negotiations by declaring its intention to reduce the newsroom workforce the following week. The parties negotiated an agreement that reduced the number of layoffs, added two weeks of “notice pay” to severance pay, and provided a one-year rehire list.

The agreement required management to conduct the reduction in force by reverse seniority in six job categories, with a pair of exceptions that permitted management to skip over one full-time employee in any one category, and two full-time employees in another category.

Philadelphia Contract

Just a week after rejecting the Philadelphia Media Network’s “final” contract offer by a vote of more than 2 to 1, in April members of the Philadelphia Newspaper Guild approved a revised proposal resulting in a three-year contract.

The revised contract averted an imminent health care funding crisis that could have increased employees’ cost for coverage by as much as $200 per week.

But management insisted on changes to seniority rules when layoffs occur — the primary reason members rejected management’s initial “final” offer, which also failed to resolve the funding crisis for the health and welfare plans.

To discourage management from laying off employees out of seniority, the union eventually negotiated double severance for affected workers.

The contract provides no raises, but it includes a $1,000 signing bonus. The agreement also merges the Inquirer and the Daily News contract with the Memorandum of Agreement that covers employees in the bargaining unit at philly.com into a single collective bargaining agreement.

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People’s World Turns

The 10-member staff of the People’s World joined the Chicago Newspaper Guild after winning voluntary recognition on Feb. 8.

Chicago AFT: Smart

The Chicago staff of the American Federation of Teachers won voluntary recognition for a unit of five workers at the union’s Chicago regional office.