‘Journalists Are Among the Heroes of the Moment’

Wave of Attacks Prompts Guild to Intensify Fight for ‘Right to Report’

A

n upswing in attacks on journalists in recent months has prompted The NewsGuild-CWA to intensify its efforts to protect the Right to Report.

“Hatred of the media has been stoked by the president of the United States and some who support him — and the results are not surprising,” said President Bernie Lunzer when he learned that Guardian reporter Ben Jacobs had been body-slammed by a candidate for Congress in May.

“Ben Jacobs — and all journalists who ask tough questions in search of the truth — are among the heroes of the moment,” he added. “They are acting on behalf of the American people — reporting facts, filling in the blanks, and making connections.”

“Trump’s demonization of journalists has created a dangerous climate, ripe for intimidation, arrests and violence,” Lunzer said.

“But something else is happening as well,” he pointed out. “Journalists are persevering — and people are paying attention.”

A Federal Law

In response to the attacks on the media, the Guild launched the #Right2Report project on May 3, World Press Freedom Day. Since then, the union has joined with others to highlight and condemn attacks on journalists.

The Guild also plans to work with allies to support federal legislation to protect journalists by imposing greater penalties on those who harm them while they’re performing their duties. The union is urging support for legislation that would make it a felony to assault a journalist.

“While the Guild also is invested in protecting the rights of ordinary citizens to do things such as record police actions in public places, the Right to Report project is focused on the rights of working journalists,” said Guild International Chairperson Martha Waggoner.

In addition to the assault on Jacobs, other recent incursions into the First Amendment’s guarantee of a free press have occurred as well. They include:

• In West Virginia, Dan Heyman, a reporter for the Public News Service was charged with “willful disruption of governmental processes” when he repeatedly tried to question Health and Human Services Secretary Tom Price.

• Award-winning CQ Roll Call reporter John M. Donnelly was roughed up by security guards when he tried to question Federal Communications Commissioner Michael O’Rielly after a news conference.

• At least six journalists were arrested and charged with felony riot at protests on Inauguration Day; charges were dropped against all but two independent journalists.

• In February, the White House banned reporters from CNN, the New York Times, Politico, the Los Angeles Times and BuzzFeed from attending a press briefing. (In solidarity, reporters from AP and Time refused to attend.)

• In February Trump labelled journalists “enemies of the people.”

• Barely noticed in a May 16 New York Times article by Guild member Michael S. Schmidt was this gem: “Alone in the Oval Office, Mr. Trump began the discussion by condemning leaks to the news media, saying that Mr. Comey should consider putting reporters in prison for publishing classified information, according to one of Mr. Comey’s associates.”

The White House has taken steps to limit the public’s access to information — refusing to release visitor logs, prohibiting journalists from recording numerous press briefings, and limiting access to cabinet officials.

A petition launched by the Guild on World Press Freedom Day condemns threats to press freedom and demands that government officials “allow journalists to do their jobs.” It also condemns attempts to demonize reporters and to undermine legitimate journalism by promoting fake news.

Not New

But attacks on the media are nothing new and they’re not limited to the current occupant of the White House or to Washington, D.C., Lunzer points out.

• In 2014, journalists were arrested while covering protests in Ferguson, MO, and in late 2016 and early 2017, reporters were arrested while covering demonstrations in Standing Rock ND.

• In June, two journalists were arrested in St. Paul, MN, while reporting on protests following the not-guilty verdict in the case of the police officer who shot and killed Philando Castile.

“The Right to Report project is a natural continuation of the work that The NewsGuild has done over the years,” Lunzer said. In 2014, the Guild gave its highest award, the Herbert Block Freedom Award, to New York Times reporter James Risen, who federal officials were threatening to jail if he didn’t confirm the name of a source for his book.

The Guild’s Executive Committee also quietly signs on as a “friend of the court” to many legal briefs involving the First Amendment. Examples include:

• A case in the Second Circuit regarding journalists’ rights to record the police in public.

• A case involving the New York Police Department’s refusal to say whether it has records that are responsive to the request.

• A case involving the military’s plans to subpoena Mark Boal, a journalist and Academy Award-winning filmmaker, for his notes and recordings relating to interviews with Bowe Bergdahl, the soldier who was held captive by the Taliban in Afghanistan.

“These are not ordinary times,” Lunzer said. “We have a special responsibility to stand up for freedom of the press and to fight for transparency in government. That is a responsibility we take very seriously.”

Cutlines:

NewsGuild members at the San Jose Mercury News marked World Press Freedom Day with banners and desk signs.