

the media equation

## Why the Media Loves Labor Now

At a moment of political turmoil, economic change and a pandemic-driven focus on how we work, labor has become a hot news beat.



The Chief, a newspaper covering New York City's civil servants, has an unlikely new owner: a California vintner. Credit...Eli Smith

By [Ben Smith](#)

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The top story in the weekly print edition of The Chief-Leader, a publication that has long covered New York City's civil servants, is often about the hottest job listing in town. Last week, it was, "Bus Operator Jobs With MTA Starting at \$23.84 an Hour."

For years, the paper, a broadsheet founded for firefighters in 1897, has been following the dual downward trajectories of the newspaper industry and the labor movement. Its top editor for the last 23 years, Richard Steier, took pay cuts in 2019 and 2020.

But in August, something unexpected happened: An entrepreneur [swooped in and bought The Chief](#) from the family who had owned it for more than a century, with a plan to transform it into a national voice of public and private-sector labor.

The new owner, Ben August, is an unlikely steward of a publication whose nearly 30,000 subscribers are almost entirely New York City municipal workers. He made his fortune several years ago [selling](#) a human resource services company he had built. Since then, he has devoted himself to his vineyard in Napa Valley and a nonprofit group that investigates who really wrote the plays attributed to Shakespeare. Mr. August believes it was probably Edward de Vere, the 17th earl of Oxford, and named a wine, Earl 17, in his honor.

Mr. August is also passionate about the subjects covered by The Chief. Asked why he had bought the paper, he told me, “Labor is underrepresented, organized labor might be making a comeback, and I would like to fan those flames if at all possible.”

Mr. August and Mr. Steier said they would publish a new stream of national labor coverage early next year, and Mr. August said he hoped to eventually double the paper’s staff, which now stands at three reporters.

His timing is good. Gallup [reported](#) this fall that more Americans approve of labor unions than at any time since 1965. President Biden’s National Labor Relations Board looks far more sympathetically on their fights than did President Donald Trump’s. A tight labor market has also [shifted leverage](#) toward workers. “Buoyed by shortages in labor and supplies that leave employers more vulnerable, and frustrated by what they see as unfair treatment during the pandemic, workers are standing up for a better deal,” my colleague Noam Scheiber, who covers labor for The Times, [wrote](#) recently.

And the planned revival of The Chief is one of a handful of indications that, at a moment of political turmoil, economic change and a pandemic-driven focus on how we work, labor has become a hot news beat.

That’s evident in the new energy of the niche publications [Labor Notes](#), [Strikewave](#) and [Payday Report](#). There has also been a recent expansion of labor coverage at major publications.

Steven Greenhouse, a former labor reporter for The New York Times, told me that for a time in the 2000s, he was the “the only full-time daily labor reporter.” Now, there are at least a dozen at legacy outlets and digital ones like Vice and HuffPost.

The change is also evident in how some of the biggest economic stories are covered. Reports on companies ranging from Amazon to Uber are not as likely to fall under the boosterish genre of gee-whiz technology stories these days. And the tales of heroic entrepreneurs have given way to coverage focused on their employees — stories documenting the complex and sometimes damaging effects of the digital transformation on [warehouse workers](#), [taxi drivers](#), [delivery workers](#) and [white-collar employees](#).

The shift was spurred, many journalists believe, by the growing labor movement inside American newsrooms, which has made reporters “more knowledgeable and sympathetic to labor issues,” said [Kim Kelly, a freelance journalist](#) who has written a labor column for Teen Vogue since 2018. “An entire generation of journalists has been turned into labor activists.”

Not everyone sees it that way. Jon Schleuss, the president of the NewsGuild, a union representing newsroom employees at The Times and other news outlets across the country, told

me that the effect is “not necessarily sympathy, but a deeper understanding.”



More Perfect Union, a nonprofit news outlet, is starting a new stream of videos. The first one is an animated case for universal child care. Credit...More Perfect Union

The new brand of labor journalism runs the gamut from conventional newspaper reporting to outright advocacy, and the most ambitious new entrant on the scene hails unapologetically from the Bernie Sanders stream of class-based American politics: More Perfect Union, a nonprofit news outlet that quietly started in February. It is led, in part, by Faiz Shakir, the former manager of Bernie Sanders 2020 presidential campaign, and Nico Pitney, a former top editor at The Huffington Post and NowThisNews.

More Perfect Union, a video-centric outlet that has a staff of 24 and backing from George Soros’s Open Society Foundation, among other donors, does not take money from labor unions, Mr. Shakir said. But it has proved a potent ally on picket lines by delivering emotionally charged testimonials from workers. Videos about Amazon’s anti-union [tactics](#) and conditions at [Frito-Lay](#) and Kellogg’s have each received more than two million views on [Twitter](#), as well as steady engagement on TikTok, which the site’s leaders see as a way to reach outside the chattering class.

Mr. Shakir said More Perfect Union has shied away from coverage of the new organizing among tech workers and journalists.

“Reporters love to report on other reporters, so there is not going to be a lack of coverage of organizing in the media industry,” he said, “but we can fill in in other areas. We’re talking about the Dollar General workers, the Burger King workers, the Buffalo Wild Wings workers. We can’t lose sight of that.”

On Sunday, More Perfect Union is starting a new stream of videos aimed at providing a left-wing answer to PragerU, a YouTube titan of right-wing ideology. The project, called Classroom (get it?), is aimed at building “the Op-Ed page, or the argument, for why the values that we hold are right,” Mr. Shakir said. [The first video](#) is a punchy, animated case for universal child care.

The labor media surge has come with some eye rolls from the journalists who were working the beat before it was cool. “It’s both an exciting and an immensely frustrating time to be a labor reporter,” Sarah Jaffe, the host of the podcast “Belabored,” said in an email. She said she regularly sees “rookie mistakes” in the newcomers’ union coverage, including confusion about the intricacies of labor law and impatience with the granular details of contract negotiations.

But union leaders say the media attention is part of a larger comeback for the labor movement.

Sara Nelson, the international president of the Association of Flight Attendants (whose [appearance](#) on the cover of Fast Company this summer was its own labor milestone), said sympathetic coverage of unions can fill strike funds, put pressure on companies and bolster workers’ morale.

“I can’t tell you how much that coverage means to people in the middle of a strike,” she said.

Perhaps the best evidence of how hot the labor story has become lies in the overheated trend stories of late, a raft of articles that renamed October “Striketober” and have called this moment a “strike wave.” But as the Los Angeles Times reporters Jenny Jarvie and Margot Roosevelt [noted](#) recently, the number of workers out on strike is, in fact, “relatively tiny.”

What may be more striking, the labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein wrote in [Dissent](#), “is the cheerleading, the hope, and the expectation for a labor upsurge that has been manifest ever since scores of eager young journalists descended upon Bessemer, Alabama, last winter to cover the union effort there to organize an Amazon distribution center.”

The story of that organizing effort even made it to the pages of The Chief, which is now keeping an eye on the next beat of the Amazon story, Mr. Steier said, a possible labor action at its giant warehouse on Staten Island.

Mr. August, the new owner, said he’s planning to run the paper as a business, and sees a growing market, as well as a mission.

“I want to support the unions in their efforts to involve employees and workers in what they can do when they organize,” he said.

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