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OUTSIDE THE TENT

Falling down on the job on labor coverage

An occasional feature in which The Times invites outside critics to beat up on a Southern California newspaper that is celebrating its 125th birthday.

January 15, 2006 | Peter Dreier | Peter Dreier is professor of politics and director of the urban and environmental policy program at Occidental College.

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UNION ACTIVISTS and allies are buzzing about The Times' critical four-part series on the United Farm Workers, published last week. But many wonder why the newspaper devoted so many words and resources to this front-page attack on the UFW but fails to routinely cover the day-to-day work of union organizing and, equally important, the job conditions that workers face.

You can usually count on The Times to cover unions when they strike. When several major unions recently bolted from the AFL-CIO to form an alternative labor group, the newspaper ran several stories about internal union disputes that led to the rupture and the possible consequences for the labor movement. Two years ago, The Times' series on Wal-Mart's treatment of its workers and worldwide business operations won several top journalism prizes.

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FROM THE ARCHIVES

Money Minute: Do labor unions have a future? [Video]
March 22, 2012

But you'll search the paper in vain for similar coverage of the following labor issues:

- * Where was The Times' expose on the federal government's failure to regularly inspect mines and enforce mine-safety laws before the recent tragedy at the Sago mine in West Virginia?
- * Where was the Page 1 takeout on the federal government's devastating budget cutbacks for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (the major workplace health and safety agency)? On the Department of Labor's failure to adequately enforce wage-and-hour laws? Or on the current National Labor Relations Board, which lets companies that routinely violate labor laws and workers' rights off the hook, thwarting union organizing?

- * Why aren't reporters regularly writing stories on the exploitative working conditions in the region's garment sweatshops, many of which operate within blocks of the paper's downtown offices? Shouldn't there be frequent stories on whether state and federal agencies are regularly inspecting these sweatshops and punishing employers who pay their workers less than the minimum wage or force them to work overtime without pay?
- * Why doesn't The Times regularly cover the exciting efforts of such unions as Unite Here, the Service Employees International Union, the United Food and Commercial Workers and the California Nurses Assn. to organize hotel workers, janitors, security guards, grocery workers, nurses and other healthcare employees? And what about the work of such watchdog and advocacy groups as Sweatshop Watch and the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights in L.A.?
- * Why is there no regular mention of the voting records of the region's congressional delegation on worker-oriented legislation, such as OSHA's budget and proposed increases in the minimum wage?
- * Why doesn't The Times report on the responsible employers who work cooperatively with unions and treat workers with respect, and contrast them to companies that spend enormous resources to undermine their workers' rights?
- * Why relegate most union news to the paper's Business section? Indeed, since there are vastly more employees than business owners in Greater Los Angeles, why doesn't The Times create a Labor section?

Up until the 1980s, most major newspapers, including The Times, had a regular labor reporter. Today, few papers, The Times among them, have even one reporter exclusively assigned to cover labor.

That may be a consequence -- even a cause -- of declining union membership. But The Times serves a metropolitan area that has become the U.S. capital of the working poor, where more than 800,000 workers (almost twice the national rate) are union members and where (unlike most parts of the country) labor union membership is actually growing.

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Lately there have been rumors that The Times may be planning to put a reporter on the labor beat soon. Good. That would be a start. In fact, the paper should have several reporters covering labor unions and workplace issues full time.

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