

## Labor History: The “Newsies” Strike

By Ed Leavy

The very successful Disney musical “Newsies,” which was nominated for eight Tony awards, was inspired by an actual event. In 1899, two of the most prosperous publishers in the country, Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst, decided to work together to figure out a way to make even more money. The Spanish-American war, which was largely created by the press as a way to sell newspapers, had ended; a predictable dip in sales ensued. Pulitzer and Hearst got together to figure out a way to make up for the lost sales (somehow, this type of collaboration between ostensible competitors is overlooked when people rhapsodize about the “free markets”). In the way things work, they decided to target the bottom rung of the publishing ladder, the newsboys.

Newsboys throughout the Northeast all followed the same economic system: they would buy a bundle of 100 papers for (usually) fifty cents, then sell the papers for eight cents apiece. If they sold all 100 papers, they would make thirty cents, the equivalent of approximately \$8.40 today. Most of the boys who sold the papers were orphans or runaways who lived in sparse, dormitory-style housing that catered primarily to newsboys. During the Spanish-American war, the newspapers had raised their bundle price from \$0.50 to \$0.60, but because a greater volume of papers were sold the news boys still were able to eke out an existence. After the war, when the number of papers sold declined dramatically, most newspapers returned to the \$0.50 rate. Pulitzer, the publisher of *The New York World* (and the person for whom the Pulitzer Prize is named) and Hearst, the publisher of *The New York Journal* (and the inspiration for the movie *Citizen Kane*) together agreed that they would keep their bundle price at \$0.60. More importantly, they discontinued the practice of buying back the unsold papers from the boys at cost. This practice had a disastrous impact on the news boys. Not only were they making less per paper, but because they were stuck with the investment in unsold papers, they were often unable to pay for a bundle the next day. One bad could end the “career” of some newsboys.

The newsboys got together and decided to refuse to sell the *Journal* and the *World*. They pleaded with the public not to buy the papers. When Pulitzer and Hearst brought in adults to sell the *Journal* and *World*, near riots ensued in some places, and the adults quickly headed home. To keep the strikers inspired, huge rallies were held. Newsboys gathered one day on the Brooklyn Bridge to protest Pulitzer’s and Hearst’s actions. Another rally featured a prize for the best speech. The chief spokesman for the strikers was Kid Blink (so named because he wore an eyepatch; it was a less sensitive time), whose comments were written in the other papers so as to emphasize his thick Brooklyn accent. The other New York papers gave a great deal of coverage to the strike, both because of the colorful nature of the strikers (“Crutches” and “Racetrack” were other strike leaders), and because the public’s support of the strike increased their own circulation. The strike spread to other cities, as railroad commuters refused to buy the paper in support of the newsboys. Bundles of the papers that were supposed to be sent to nearby cities remained at the depot, undelivered.

When the usual method of dealing with strikes – threats, scab workers, and violence – failed to intimidate the newsboys, Pulitzer and Hearst agreed to compromise. They left the increased bundle cost in place, but agreed to buy back unsold papers. The newsboys, with little political leverage, agreed to the compromise and returned to work. Similar strikes for similar reasons occurred throughout the Northeast in the following decade, including in Hartford in 1909. Disney’s musical has kept these strikes in the public’s consciousness (or at least sub-consciousness) for the past several years.

Unfortunately, it has not inspired Disney to treat its own employees with the respect the musical celebrates. In 2014, as *Newsies* played to full houses on Broadway, Disney laid off 250 workers who ran the computer system at their theme parks, then forced them to train the foreign workers who were taking the newly outsourced jobs. Perhaps if the workers had responded with a musical number – or better yet, all of the employees went out on strike – Disney would have paid as much attention to their jobs as they have to those of the newsboys of 1899.

*This article was based on information taken from several websites. In the interest of full disclosure, I am (to put it mildly) not a Disney fan.*