
President's Message to Unifor 191 Members at the Winnipeg Free Press

These are not the best of times in the newspaper industry. The revenue declines of the business have hit us at the Winnipeg Free Press. The result is we continue to see positions remain vacant when people leave. This year alone, 7 members were laid off.

This is not the message I want to send at this time of year but I feel it's important that you hear it as there are rumours going around the building. Every day that goes by, the paper is losing revenue and subscribers. To put it in context: 2015 is expected to be a record sales year for the North American auto industry; locally, house sales are expected to be the best in 100 years. But the advertising revenue at the WFP is at an all-time low and it's predicted to continue to decline further in 2016. The economy has bounced back from 2008 but the retail world has learned to thrive without newspapers.

The Free Press has fared better than most news organizations in Canada and across North America -- the paper's revenues exceed expenses but the profit gap has been narrowing every year. Does WFP management have a response to this situation?

The newsroom has developed the Metamorphosis project, a new paywall and emphasis on web-first reporting. The paper's long-term survival depends on the success of this plan but there is no marketing plan to promote this new editorial effort and when asked when it will happen, management's reply to me was "we're working on it."

The plan the WFP management seems intent on is further cuts. Majority owner Ron Stern has ordered the paper to strip millions of dollars from expenses in its operating budget in 2016. The first target has been our carriers.

The WFP initially proposed to take away flyers from the daily paper and have them delivered by the non-union Flyer Advantage (which WFP owns). That would mean a significant pay cut for carriers.

When the carriers overwhelmingly rejected a Company proposal to keep flyers in-house in return for a reduction in pay for a type of flyer called an on-route, the paper informed us it was exploring contracting out the 435-member carrier force. Carriers don't make a lot of money and we don't know if there is a business venture out there prepared to deliver the papers for less money than the carriers are being paid now. Maybe it won't happen but the Local team and carrier representatives will be meeting with management to see if there are steps to be taken to avoid this development. The carriers will need our support in varied ways as we work together to save their jobs.

But the WFP won't stop there. There were plans to lay off all the paperhandlers and move their work to the press operators. The Local stopped that, as it was a clear violation of the collective agreement. We expect the Company will look at other areas where they can "save" money as we move through 2016.

I want to address the issue of "opening" the contract. First, we have two contracts at the WFP -- the carriers and all the insider workers. There is nothing "illegal" about re-opening a contract -- it is a normal practice of unions sanctioned by collective agreements and the Labour Relations Act. As per the Unifor constitution, any changes are subject to ratification by the membership (apart from resolves to grievances).

That said, no contract has been opened. The Company made it clear to the Local it was not asking us to re-open the inside agreement. There are no plans to re-open the contract before it expires in 2018.

In the 2013 negotiations, serious concessions were made to the Company in terms of pension and wage grids to provide an opportunity to find savings. As well, the carriers saw a reduction in travel allowance, zero increases in their pay and only a modest increase to their kilometre allowance.

The Local doesn't know where management will cut next but we know that cuts, either through attrition, tech change or layoffs, are coming.

Aldo Santin

President, Unifor Local 191