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The Guild Reporter
Commentary

May 20, 2005

Union activism is part of the story, too

By Jonathan Ment, Acting President, Kingston Newspaper Guild

The death of a union activist got me thinking recently. As a general assignments reporter based in Kingston, N.Y., I cover mostly business, which at our paper includes retail and real estate, employment, earnings, industry and more. From time to time we all write obits, cover the courts and drop in on the local police. I've covered school boards and town boards and tree harvests for wooden boards.

I also am active in our union, the Kingston Newspaper Guild. That creates a fine line for me to walk, between bargaining sessions, grievance sessions and meetings with managers on one hand, and covering the unions in our area—the organizing efforts, strikes and occasional scandals—on the other.

April 7 was to be filled with a bit of the usual: a story for taxpayers reminding them of the approaching deadline, an item on an upcoming job fair, a new store opening. But en route to that opening, news happened: fire trucks and state police, flashing lights and plastic yellow tape at a railroad crossing about 10 miles from the opening and the office.

I got what I could at the scene, confirming IDs and picking up a bit of detail and comments from the neighbors, fire chief and railroad rep. I then headed to the store opening, and after returning to the office placed a round of calls about the accident. By midday, more details began emerging.

As director of maintenance and plant operations at a local community college, Joseph Budik, 64, was loved. He'd been there 17 years. The college president told me how Budik walked the campus with a sense of ownership, like a beat-cop checking on its well-being.

He told me how Budik did the work of two men, coming in early and leaving late. It would take two employees to replace him. (I doubt he earned a double salary, and as a department head he would have been exempt from overtime.)

The photo the college provided to the Daily Freeman showed Budik awarding a union scholarship to a student from a ceremony a year earlier. I spoke briefly with a member of the professional staff union's executive board and learned Budik had been its president for at least 10 years. No one ever ran against him. He had taken on every job, either for the college or the union, that nobody else



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would touch.

Budik did this with a sense of humor, I was told. An easy-going, accessible nature and Scotty-like engineer-ability were among his hallmarks. He was a volunteer for the union, like me and so many others.

His co-worker questioned whether any of this mattered; I replied it was important to him, so it's important to the story about him. "Spoken like a true union man," she replied.

I thanked her, told her briefly what I do in Kingston when I'm not writing news, and started thinking.

Would any of Budik's union activity make it past the copy desk?

Would it be trivialized?

Would it be treated any differently than if this gentleman had been a lifelong fundraiser for the United Way, an active member of his church or a scout leader?

If so, why?

The president of the college wasn't afraid or ashamed of Budik's activism—at least not that I could tell.

Budik's coworkers respected and appreciated the work he did for the union—at least that was the impression I got.

The public deserved to know that this was an important part of the man's life. It was news. Whether or not my newspaper's readers got to hear about it, it enriched my life and so I wanted to share the news.

The next day, in a rare move for me, I read our front page. My story led the paper, as I knew a fatality would, and the union elements were intact.

There were no words of criticism, critique or compliment from anyone on staff in or out of The Newspaper Guild—and that's fine.

The news was delivered and Budik's story was told—in its entirety.

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