

GUILD LEADER

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Copy Desk Endures Staff Cuts

Loss of IEs further stresses copy desk

The Providence Newspaper Guild experienced its first layoffs in recent memory, when late last year the company eliminated the jobs of five irregular extras, including three copy editors. As a result the newsroom copy desk, already riddled with vacancies, has been overburdened with work.

The Guild intervened to save the job of a sixth irregular who was five weeks away from qualifying for regular employment. The Guild persuaded the company to hire this person, a visuals editor, as a part-timer with benefits.

The loss of the other copy editors was disheartening. Irregular extras were hired as needed to fill gaps in the work schedule, and they made frequent, important contributions to the copy desk. The IEs also had to suffer the indignity of learning through the grapevine right before Christmas that they were losing their jobs.

Although we cannot be sure, the Guild leadership does not believe there will additional layoffs in the foreseeable future. The company seems intent on shrinking the workforce – particularly the copy desk -- through attrition and job reassignments, and has said it has no plans to lay off regular employees. Also, our contract has strong language that makes layoffs very difficult. Part-timers would have to go first. But the company would not be able to hand-pick the individuals it wanted to get rid of. Any attempt to lay someone off would trigger an elaborate seniority-driven bumping system.

Nevertheless the work-force reduction has left the copy desk severely short-staffed and

stressed. Upper management believed that the introduction of the new CCI computer system would reduce the need for copy editors. Instead, CCI has proven to be rigid and Byzantine, introducing more hassles than efficiencies. Staff is being reduced anyway.

The Guild leadership is very concerned about the proposed reorganization of the newsroom copy desk, and we strongly urge members to keep in touch with us and bring any concerns to our attention.

The Guild can do the following:

- Protect you from retaliation for problems that are not your fault, such as pages going late because you were given too much to do.
- Intervene to stop managers from doing Guild work, as long as Guild members inform the leadership when this happens.
- Ensure that people are compensated for the work they do, both the number of hours and the classification level.
- Strive to negotiate better small-grid compensation in the next contract.
- Negotiate with the company now over major workplace changes that affect people's working conditions and job assignments.

One thing the Guild cannot do is stop the company from mismanaging the newspaper. The contract's management-rights clause gives the company the right to decide how to assign work. But Guild members can refuse to compensate for management ineptitude. We should not take on our shoulders the burden of making things run smoothly in impossible conditions. Please see some guidelines on the reverse.

Guidelines for Copy Editors

Every time one of us does the work of three people, we tell the company that the two missing people were never needed, and next time they'll ask us each to do the work of five. Every day we cut corners to get the paper out on time, we endorse the company's cutbacks, and invite more. We are not responsible for management's staffing problems. Our responsibility is to our readers, the quality of the newspaper, and the integrity of our profession.

1. Do your job according to professional standards. Do only your job. That is, do the amount of work that a diligent editor can be reasonably expected to accomplish in 7.5 hours.
2. If a manager hands you additional tasks, describe what you're working on and ask the manager which of your existing responsibilities the manager wants you to abandon.
3. When it becomes clear that you cannot make deadline and also do the work you've been assigned, alert your manager that you are overburdened and may go late. But don't neglect your responsibilities to catch errors, ensure that the paper is readable, and prevent libel suits.
4. If an overburdened colleague asks for your help, assure him or her that we're all in this together, and that you will vouch for how much work the person had if anyone complains about deadlines being missed.
5. If a page goes late, make some notes indicating the working conditions that led to it.
6. If a manager asks to speak with you about your job performance, such as pages going late, you have an absolute right to ask for union representation in the meeting. Call one of the phone numbers below. Such a meeting cannot take place without a Guild representative to stand by you.
7. If a manager does any work normally done by a member of the bargaining unit, bring it to the Guild's attention immediately.
8. If you work overtime, note it on your time card. If your manager does not authorize overtime, don't work it. Leave even if the job isn't done.
9. If you work in a job in a higher classification than what you're being paid for, put in for small grid. If you are regularly and consistently working in a higher classification, notify the Guild.
10. If you see anything going on that you think might be a contract violation, or a matter of concern, call the Guild. Even if you're not sure whether it's important, call anyway.

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