



Straight Talk About Union Publications

By Alan Saly

Union publications fall into several broad categories. There is the publication that has a primary purpose of getting Union leaders re-elected. There's the publication that is meant to drive members to events or to take part in political action. And then there's the consistent Union publication that strives to balance competing interests in the Union and provide a broad range of relevant information. It manages to fulfill all of the above goals — but doesn't come across as heavy-handed in the process.

A good example of the latter is DC 37's Public Employee Press, a substantial publication that churns out a lot of valuable information, year after year. While the Public Employee Press always supports DC 37's top leadership, it strives to not appear too partisan, and in this it mostly succeeds.

The most important hallmark of any good publication is consistency. In order for a newsletter to generate a following, it should come out on a regular basis. Members should expect to see it in their mailbox or their inbox. The second most important consideration is layout: today's consumer of news and information does not have a high tolerance for an amateurish layout, or for pages of unbroken text. The Union member, like any other general reader, expects a layout that entertains as well as informs. This means high quality photography, color as opposed to black & white, and clearly written text that delivers a readable message. Long tracts and lengthy opinion pieces generally do more for the vanity of the author than for the education of the reader.

A print publication still has value today. Many Union members like the feel of a newsletter and most politicians are still driven by publications they can hold in their hands and refer to. But this is changing. Union publications must also be placed on line, and features drawn from the publication should be e-mailed to members as special bulletins, complete with links to websites that offer more complete information, including audio and video. Without Unions taking this extra initiative, it is hard to see how we will be able to successfully compete with all of the media clamoring for our members' attention.

Unions have an obligation to the membership to present relevant, timely information about social issues, the economy, and the environment. To ignore the larger world in favor of a club mentality runs the risk of losing relevance. If the Union only focuses on elections, legislation, and the mechanics of pensions and health plans, it will occupy less of a place in the lives of members than it should. A broader focus — as demonstrated by the Public Employee Press — is part of our responsibility to the labor movement and to society as a whole.