

## CHAPTER 13

# Pickets and payouts: Unions in the newsroom

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Alysson Watson recalls she 'was at the barricades at every opportunity'. After starting her journalism career in the mid-1980s as a cadet for the *Newcastle Herald* she joined the Australian Journalists' Association (AJA). At first, she found the daily routine of the newsroom staid, with 'quite earnest people' bashing away on keyboards. She soon learnt it was different late at night, when the printing press started up. 'You could certainly feel it once it started', she remembers, feeling the building moving, hearing it, smelling it. Intrigued, Watson became acquainted with the 'fantastic, militant bastards' of the Printing and Kindred Industries Union who worked downstairs.

She remembers them as 'old school' unionists, workers who 'stood together' on pickets and knew how to 'to bung one on', a reference to bringing about strike action. For Watson, the printers offered 'a good example' of unionism. She subsequently became a member of the *Newcastle Herald's* House Committee, and a workplace activist. In those days, before the merger that in 1992 formed the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) as a super-union for creative professionals, the AJA covered news reporters, subs, photographers and artists.<sup>1</sup> The House Committee's role was to defend their working conditions and interests on site. Watson saw it

as serious work, and became involved in industrial action for some years.

Many journalists were less involved or less interested in their union than Watson, whether out of apathy or due to their employers' hostility to unions, but the prospect of large-scale redundancies focused their attention. They learnt, and perhaps began to appreciate, the generosity of the redundancy provisions the union had negotiated for the two biggest media companies, News Corporation Australia and Fairfax Media, back in the late 1980s.

The union's then federal secretary, Chris Warren, recalls before then the industry had far less need for redundancy rounds, and the standard payout was 12 to 16 weeks' pay.<sup>2</sup> The Hawke Labor government's 1987 media ownership laws substantially concentrated media ownership, and forced the closure of two metropolitan dailies and one weekly newspaper.<sup>3</sup> During this the union negotiated for the printing industry's redundancy provisions to apply to journalists. These were two weeks' severance pay plus four weeks' pay for every year of service, uncapped. This meant if you had worked for one media company for your entire career, you stood to walk away with more than three years' salary.

In the early 1990s, News Corporation capped the payouts at two years of salary, but as Warren's successor, Paul Murphy, acknowledges, compared to other industries the redundancy provisions at News and especially Fairfax Media were at 'the higher end of the spectrum'.<sup>4</sup> Warren put it more plainly; at his farewell speech in 2015 he said the redundancy conditions were one of his proudest achievements after 28 years serving the union.

In 2012, when mass redundancies were announced by Fairfax Media, Watson says the House Committee moved quickly to try and save jobs.

'We were very vocal, very anti, very gung ho, in that we need to stop this. We need to try at the eleventh hour to stop this, and we will do that.'

By 2015, when the next mass redundancy round started, her thinking had changed. She says everybody's thinking had changed. The *Newcastle Herald* House Committee's sole aim was to 'make sure that people who lost their jobs were well treated, and people who stayed were well treated'. Yet, as Watson recalls, people getting tapped on the shoulder 'were told not to talk', a directive that only fuelled uncertainty and speculation, with people taking bets on who was going. Management-staff relations quickly soured to the point where 'our general manager bravely stood up a couple of times, in front of everybody, but he soon saw that that was an arse-kicking to nowhere'.

Meanwhile, the union kept negotiating until it convinced management to be flexible in deciding who would be forced out. As Watson sees it, flexibility meant 'horse trading' around people's futures: 'Here we've got someone who's not a sub-editor who wants to go. But we want to let them go. Can we save a sub-editor? Can we ...?' It sounds awkward, even callous, but Watson says she would 'never criticise the union for what it did'. Winning 'a bit of wiggle room' around redundancies saved some people's jobs. Under the circumstances, that was better than nothing.

For many Australian journalists, joining the Alliance (MEAA) has been a matter of principle. They have loyally paid membership dues because they believe the union supports and protects journalists and journalism. And, over the years, their allegiance has been rewarded, not simply because of the generous redundancy provisions, but because unionism has delivered them other tangible gains: from establishing equities around pay, conditions, leave and entitlements, to collective pushback against proprietorial interference in content and other attempts to devalue journalistic skills.

What is more, even the 'free-riders' who never joined up benefited from the redundancy arrangements. From mid-2012, media employers were bent on large-scale job shedding, but enterprise agreements meant they had to at least offer voluntary redundancies before involuntary dismissals.