

TorSun Journal de Quebec lockout
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By Sid Ryan

There's been a growing and welcome trend lately where more of us are thinking about the food we eat. What kinds of chemicals were used to grow it? Was it sold under fair trade conditions? How far did it travel before getting to our grocers' shelves?

But how many of us are giving the same kind of consideration to what we feed our brains? How aware are we of where the news we consume comes from, whether we're reading and hearing a range of views or whether what's passing for news is really promotion for the other commercial interests of any particular media company?

Those questions have been raised by a labour dispute that's been running for almost a year in Quebec City. While it may seem a long way from the Toronto area, the same issues that have led to the lockout of more than 250 journalists, photographers, classified ad and office staff and a supporting strike by printing workers at the Journal de Quebec are confronting workers and news media across the country. The owner, Quebecor, also owns Sun Media and this newspaper.

Quebecor wants all staff to work an extra day each week for the same pay. And it wants to cut its workforce by outsourcing its classified ads to a call centre in an Ottawa suburb — putting many women, many single mothers out of work; by modernizing its printing equipment (and paying printers a different wage for commercial jobs run on the new presses), and by making reporters “multitask.”

Management wants journalists to also be photographers and videographers, preparing stories not only for the daily newspaper but also for the web site and any other news outlet owned by Quebecor.

Anyone who multitasks on a regular basis knows it can be done, but that quality suffers in the long run. Even more important, though, is that we have fewer and fewer news outlets and fewer and fewer individuals reporting the news to us.

I get to express an opinion in this column; in fact, to their credit, when the editors at the Toronto Sun approached me about writing this column almost three years ago, it was because they wanted to expand the diversity of voices in this newspaper. At the Journal de Quebec, Quebecor Media is demanding the opposite.

Every reporter has a point of view. It is expressed in their choice of facts, who they interview, the words they use to tell the story. With fewer reporters providing more of the news, we get fewer points of view.

That matters in an age where four conglomerates control 70% of Canada's daily papers, three corporations broadcast most of the televised news and two companies own the majority of radio stations. It matters in a world where we see the possibility of two families controlling the presidency of the United States for close to a quarter-century — a strange phenomenon in a democracy, one that John F. Kennedy biographer Ted Sorensen attributed in a recent interview to “name recognition.”

That's what media convergence gets you. The locked-out workers at Journal de Quebec decided right from the start not to walk the traditional picket line. Instead, the editorial staff put their talents to use publishing a free daily newspaper, MédiaMatinQuébec. The office and printing workers distribute 40,000 copies on the streets of Quebec City every day. And they're raising the alarm about media convergence.

Take the launch last fall of former prime minister Brian Mulroney's autobiography. Published in French by a Quebecor company, it was big news in Quebecor's newspapers, its Canoe web site, its radio and television outlets and in its Archambault stores. The former PM, by the way, is a Quebecor director and his former spokesperson, Luc Lavoie, is Quebecor's vice-president of communications.

None of this bodes well for our democratic system, where an informed electorate is key to making it all work. Meanwhile, in a few weeks, the workers from Journal de Quebec will mark the one-year anniversary of publishing their free newspaper. I don't think many of them will be celebrating their achievement while their jobs hang in the balance.