

## **Singleton Strikes Out**

*Judge rules workers' rights violated at Press-Telegram*

By Michael Collins

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Reactions to *8-Ball's* recent expose on media mogul on William Dean Singleton, "El Diño," were as wildly variable as the views of the publisher reported on in the article (see Sidebar). The overwhelming sense from staffers in Singleton's *MediaNews* empire was despair and resignation that nothing could stop the cost-cutting juggernaut that the Denver-based magnate is.

That is until now. On June 30th, a judge ruled that Singleton's honchos at the *Long Beach Press-Telegram* had severely violated the rights of its workers and the paper was immediately ordered to clean up its act. The ruling, delivered in unusually strong language, hammered the *Press-Telegram* and sent Singleton's empire into defensive mode, prompting it to change course. Compounding this modern-day Citizen Kane's woes are recent revelations that Singleton has been playing serious footsy with supposed arch-rival, the *Los Angeles Times*, in his acquisition of the *Daily News*. The exposure of Singleton uniting with the *Times* to take over the San Fernando Valley-based paper has sparked accusations of anti-trust law violations.

Administrative law Judge Gerald A. Wacknov ruled against *MediaNews*, which is owned by Singleton's New Jersey-based Garden State Newspapers Inc., on most counts in a case brought against it by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) on behalf of workers at the *Press-Telegram*. Wacknov didn't mince words when delivering the ruling. Among other things, the judge said that *MediaNews* unilaterally changed working conditions without bargaining or without bargaining in good faith subsequent to *MediaNews* incorporation of the *Press-Telegram* in late 1997. Wacknov found that Singleton's folks had unilaterally terminated the transportation department and all transportation workers subsequent to the sale, and must reinstate and reimburse those 21 people as well as bargain on the terminations. There "was simply no necessity, under the circumstances, to terminate the employees on April 19 (1998)," the judge ruled. He also declared that the impasse on bargaining of the transportation department occurred during a time span that was "manifestly inadequate" to do so.

According to the judge, *MediaNews'* main witness, human resource chief/company lead bargainer Jim Janiga, wasn't completely credible and in some instances was "intentionally deceptive and untruthful." Indeed, the Wacknov said, "I credit the entire testimony of [the Local's chief witness, former *Press-Telegram* Unit Chair Natalie] Shore, who impressed me as a forthright witness with a clear recollection of the positions taken by the parties during the course of bargaining; conversely, Janiga's answers to pertinent questions appeared to be evasive and often unclear or nonresponsive." Shore, a former *Press-Telegram* business reporter, was quoted in *8-Ball's* initial investigation of

Singleton's storming of Southern California's media infrastructure, criticizing El Diño, who is not-too-fondly referred to as "Dinky" by a Denver-based alternative paper.

Wacknov further ordered that the *Press-Telegram* "cease and desist from" unilaterally increasing the work load of district advisors in the circulation department and not interfere with, restrain or pressure employees in the exercise of their rights guaranteed by the NLRB. Further he ruled that helpers must be reinstated to load and unload trucks. He also ordered that the corporation post a notice and mail to the transportation workers a strongly worded pronouncement that says, among other things, literally that "WE WILL NOT dissolve the transportation department or discharge the transportation employees prior to good faith bargaining with the union. WE WILL NOT cause district advisors to unload trucks prior to good faith bargaining..."

Each worker, represented by the guild under the new scheme, would get an immediate 3% wage increase from whatever wage they were paid on July 27, plus a \$300 bonus for each fulltime worker (pro-rated for part-time workers). Over each of the following two years in late July 2001 and 2002, staffers would get the larger of either a 2% increase or the amount necessary to raise their base pay rates to match an income schedule specified in the contract. After the first anniversary of the contract, adjusted rates would range between \$526 and \$721 a week for reporters and photographers, \$399 and \$558 for district advisors, \$377 and \$410 for editorial clerks, and \$316 to \$399 for circulation clerks, relief carriers and complaint carriers.

The new structure also secures additional benefits for *Press-Telegram* staffers. It allows for merit pay so that employees, at the discretion of Singleton's managers, can be paid more than the minimums in the contract. It re-establishes a nighttime differential of \$3 per shift between 7 p.m. and 7 a.m., which adds up to \$750 a year, and restores a grievance procedure and supposedly offers increased job security. The new system also provides modified union security language and re-establishes dues check off and improves sick leave, including recognition of past years served at the *Press-Telegram* under previous owners. The program also installs a 401K plan "comparable in design, contribution rate and other conditions ... provided to non-bargaining unit employees." The company currently matches employee contributions up to 1% of the employee's annual wage.

Though *MediaNews* must retroactively restore vacation leave for circulation workers who were denied any vacation for two years, it does not restore the janitorial, transportation and customer service work that that were farmed out to low-paid nonunion, outsourced workers or were centralized in *MediaNews*'s clustering efforts. At least the plan must provide a 'floating personal holiday'.

El Diño's storming of the Southland may have been temporarily stalled, much to the delight of ink-stained scribes, but Dean Singleton's So Cal ongoing onslaught hasn't been without friends -- 'friends' that regional journalists might find unimaginable. Indeed, 'Dinky,' had found a new pal -- the *Los Angeles Times*.

After years of ferocious marketing, the *Times* had its San Fernando Valley competitor, the *Los Angeles Daily News*, running for cover near the end of the millennium in terms of hard-hitting reportage, ads and circulation. The *Times* struck out to form a new way to pre-empt the competition by financing a *Daily News* acquisition through a friendly third-party -- Dean Singleton. The strategy, even reported in the *Times*, was to "ensure potentially stronger rivals did not take ownership of the *Daily News*."

According to its own paper, "Executives at *The Times* and its corporate parent, Times Mirror, secretly lent \$50 million to *MediaNews* Group to help finance its \$130-million purchase of the *Daily News* in January 1998. The loan--and a companion option giving *The Times* the right to purchase the *Daily News*--was disclosed only after Tribune Co. took over Times Mirror earlier this year."

The *Times*' plan was apparently spurred by concerns that the *Orange County Register*, or some other truly news-hungry media conglomerates searching for chum, might challenge the almighty Los Angeles daily and gobble up the *Daily News*. Former *Times*' publisher Richard T. Schlosberg III admitted in the mid-1990s that the paper was making sure that the *Register* would not gain control of the *Daily News*. But fearful that trying to buy your competition can be troublesome -- editors and attorneys got skittish. Finally, the *Times* was advised, by its lawyers, that the Justice Department might not smile kindly on the conglomerate munching up the paper.

Enter El Diño. *L.A. Times* officers thought the monetary advance would ensure that all but a complacent competitor would remain impotent, according to published accounts. Furthermore, the deal gave the *Times* an option, for a \$1.4 million dollar fee, to purchase the *Daily News* at a future date, something that Singleton says will never happen. But watchful wags aren't buying Singleton's dismissal of any outright *Times* purchase of the *Daily News*. "Since when does a paper shell out a million and a half bucks for an option it would not seriously consider exercising," commented one *L.A. Weekly* editor. "Sure the folks on Spring street may not be the sharpest knives in the drawer, as the Staples scandal proved, but surely they aren't that stupid."

But the loan and the option fee may have helped the media colossus in other ways. Just under a year after loaning Singleton the money, the *Times* and Times Mirror slashed \$4 million from the Valley edition's annual news budget just when it was heavily investing in a localized news coverage through its new section called Our Times. The immediate result was a 1% dip in circulation for the Valley edition but that number rebounded in the first quarter of 2000 to about 190,000. In contrast, the *Daily News* has a circulation of 200,000, but that includes sales outside the San Fernando Valley.

Not only did the *Times* save itself from a facing an ambitious journalistic rival in a revitalized *Daily News*, it also assured Times Mirror that a half a dozen other media corporations could have not pose a greater threat to paper than Singleton. Those rivals range from Knight Ridder to Freedom Communications, publisher of the respected *Orange County Register*.

N. Christian Anderson III, a veteran Freedom executive and now publisher of the Register, said Freedom considered buying the *Daily News* as far back as the mid-1980s. Freedom eyed it again when it was for sale in 1994. But with the California economy on the ropes and the state's newspapers hemorrhaging dough, it passed.

With the *Daily News* acquisition, Dean Singleton made himself the El Diño of Southern California, admired by some journalists and loathed by many. With his eight papers ringing the Southland, the combined group's daily circulation is now 578,000, about half that of the *Times*. Whatever one thinks of Singleton's aggressive cost cutting measures and his unique brand of journalistic ethics, it's clear that the nickname 'Dinky' isn't very apt.