

Mitchell's Musings 7-8-13: Labor Non-Reporting

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The screenshot shows the San Francisco Chronicle website interface. At the top, there are banners for "SAN FRANCISCO SYMPHONY" and "SUMMER AND THE". Below these, a "San Francisco Chronicle" logo is accompanied by a subscription offer: "Subscribe now and save over 50%". A large advertisement for "JOHNNY MATHIS WITH THE SAN FRANCISCO SYMPHONY" is prominent, with "TICKETS START AT \$20". The main content area features the "SFGate" logo, a search bar, and a navigation menu with categories like Home, News, Sports, Business, Entertainment, Food, Living, Travel, Blogs, Shopping, Cars, Jobs, Real Estate, and Index. A "Don't Miss" section lists various news items. The main article is titled "BART strike - AM commute a mess" and includes a photo of a BART station entrance with yellow caution tape. The article text reads: "Gridlock hits roads as work stoppage leaves hundreds of thousands scrambling." and lists several bullet points: "Check Bay Area traffic", "Commuter resource list", "Social media: photos, resources", "Commute options without BART", "M&R: Transit flaws exposed", "What people are saying", and "Take a BART strike poll". A "JOHNNY MATHIS WITH THE SAN FRANCISCO SYMPHONY" advertisement is also visible on the right side of the page, with "BUY NOW" buttons for "FRI JULY 5 8PM" and "SAT JULY 6 8PM".

Back in the day, there used to be labor reporters who were knowledgeable about collective bargaining and who followed developments and policy related to labor relations. Of course, the Internet has resulted in a decline in newspaper reporting of all types. But the decline of the labor reporter predates the impact of the Internet and was really a product of the decline of organized labor as a major force in the private sector.

There are two key results of the absence of labor reporters today. Above you see a screenshot from the webpage of the *San Francisco Chronicle* of July 1, 2013. It reports on the impact of a transit (subway) strike that began on that date on commuting. But actual coverage of strike issues is rather limited. You will find claims and counterclaims by the union and management sides and references to state government intervention. You won't find information about how California public policy on government labor relations disputes is different from that in many other jurisdictions.¹ (Public sector employees in California generally have the right to strike unlike those in many other parts of the country or at the federal level.)

You won't find much information about the power of the governor to intervene in this dispute. (The governor can impose a temporary injunction but his options to require some sort of dispute settling mechanism beyond the injunction are very limited.) You won't find information about why – since the

¹ <http://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/BART-workers-on-strike-no-service-Monday-4639593.php>

governor did have that limited authority – he chose (at least at the start of the strike) not to use it. He made that choice although the union involved apparently requested he impose an injunction. You won't find analysis of why the union paradoxically might have wanted the governor to enjoin (temporarily) its own right to strike.

California has a somewhat higher unionization rate than the U.S. average but almost all that differential is due to relatively high unionization in the public sector. Apparently, however, the state's public sector differential is not sufficient to produce the kind of labor reporting that might have occurred, say, a quarter century ago. Nor is there heavy competition among newspapers that might encourage such reporting.

The screenshot shows the website for 'inside Bay Area' and 'The Oakland Tribune'. The navigation bar includes links for Home, News, My Town, Sports, Living, Entertainment, Business, Opinion, Publications, and Help. A search bar is present with the text 'Web Search by YAHOO!'. Below the navigation, there are links for 'In The News' and a database search. The main headline is 'BART workers strike'. To the left is a photo of protesters holding signs that say 'ON STRIKE Stop the Violence', 'ON STRIKE W. Rampin in Good Faith', and 'ON STRIKE Labor leaders'. To the right is a text block with the sub-headline 'Commute chaos rages on' and a 'Guide to getting around the Bay Area during shutdown'. Below the main headline is another sub-headline 'Oakland city employee unions plan one-day strike Monday' with a small photo of a basketball game.

At one time in the state's history, the *Oakland Tribune* was an influential force in state politics.² (Oakland is serviced by the same BART train system that services San Francisco.) Today, the paper is part of a group of local dailies. The *Tribune* once occupied a high rise building that dominated the City of Oakland; today the building – although architecturally interesting – is no longer occupied by the paper

² The Knowland family which ran the *Oakland Tribune* was a big factor in Republican politics. See, in particular, Montgomery, Gayle B. and Johnson, James W., *One Step from the White House: The Rise and Fall of Senator William F. Knowland*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1998.

and (I believe) is empty. As the screenshot on the previous page suggests, the reporting to be found in the *Tribune* more or less mirrors what was in the *Chronicle*. You won't find analysis of the strike or public policy on government labor relations in California, although – as the screenshot shows – there was also another strike in effect of city workers in Oakland.

I found similar reporting on the transit strike in the *San Francisco Examiner*. There was some information about strike issues, at least as described by the labor and management sides. There wasn't anything about state public policies, but there was mention of state mediation efforts. How state mediators operate or how they become involved in labor disputes was not explained.³ Nonetheless, at least one newspaper was providing news that went beyond simply reporting the effects of the strike on commuters and what the parties said.



The fact that the *Examiner* had more information than the other two newspapers suggests that there is a potential reader interest in detailed discussion of public sector labor relations issues, if only because strikes occur from time to time. In short, the interest is still there but not the specialized labor reporters that once catered to that interest. There isn't a simple remedy for this situation. However, there are

³ <http://www.sfexaminer.com/sanfrancisco/plan-your-commute-bart-workers-go-on-strike/Content?oid=2490719>

people with labor expertise in academia. Indeed, the Labor and Employment Relations Association (LERA) and the Employment Policy Research Network (EPRN) can be helpful to news reporters in making referrals.

Even if the referrals cannot answer specific questions about this particular labor dispute, they can provide some guidance on questions for reporters to ask. We noted some questions above, e.g., why the governor – although he has the power to halt the strike temporarily - has chosen not to use his authority. In addition, high-profile strikes seem inevitably to result in estimates of their “costs.” This one was no exception, as can be seen below.⁴ However, exactly how the estimate of \$73 million per day was derived is not clear or questioned in the news report. Nor is the figure put in perspective, i.e., how big is \$73 million compared to the daily GDP of the Bay Area?

The screenshot shows the Mercury News website interface. At the top, the logo for MercuryNews.com is displayed with 'Silicon Valley' above it. Below the logo are social media links for Facebook (51k likes) and options for eEdition, Subscriber Services, Mobile, Mobile Alerts, and RSS. A navigation bar includes links for NEWS, PHOTOS, BUSINESS, TECH, SPORTS, ENTERTAINMENT, LIVING, OPINION, PUBLICATIONS, MY TOWN, and HELP. A search bar is present with a 'SEARCH' button and radio buttons for 'Site' (selected) and 'Web Search by YAHOO!'. A 'today's DEALS' banner is visible. Below the navigation is a 'In The News' section with links to BART strike news, Ex-KPMG partner pleads guilty, BET awards, Zimmerman trial, and Alec Baldwin apologizes. The main article features a 'Recommend' button, a 'Send' button, and a Facebook share button indicating 72 recommendations. It also has a Google+ button with '+1' and a '2' count, an 'in Share' button, and a 'Tweet' button with a '15' count. The article title is 'BART strike costing Bay Area economy more than \$73 million a day' by George Avalos, Oakland Tribune. The post date is 07/01/2013 04:20:36 PM PDT and the update date is 07/01/2013 05:30:59 PM PDT. The first sentence of the article is 'The Bay Area economy stands to lose more than \$73 million a day in lost productivity and commerce for each day the'.

So what lessons should be drawn? Media reporters need to go beyond what the parties say about their dispute. Both sides have an interesting in spinning public opinion and in using the news media to meet their bargaining objectives. There are, however, neutral observers in the academic world who might

⁴ http://www.mercurynews.com/business/ci_23578931/bart-strike-costing-bay-area-economy-more-than

provide some insights. And what about those academics? They need to make themselves available when major disputes occur to fill in where once labor reporters were available to provide analysis.

Note: This musing of 7-8-13 was actually posted on July 2, 2013.