

# FREE PRESS

Bulletin of the Campaign for Press Freedom Oct 1980 : No 3

If individuals or groups have been seriously misrepresented in a newspaper or magazine, they should have a chance to put their case to readers of that publication

## Demand for right of reply raises Fleet Street blood pressure

NO ONE can have been surprised that one of the first groups to feel it had been seriously misrepresented after the autumn launch of the Right of Reply was the campaign itself.

The *Observer* chose to attack the campaign, the TUC, and the NUJ delegate who proposed the motion carried by the TUC, all without making much effort to say what it was, exactly, it was attacking. Readers were only informed that "in the name of press freedom the wilder political fringes in this country would like to destroy it".

The *Observer* refused to accept a script of the TUC speech it had chosen to attack.

But letters from Campaign members did appear in the *Observer*, *Sunday Times*, and *Daily Mail* putting some of the record straight.

Campaign Secretary John Jennings comments: "These reactions are of course entirely predictable, and since one of our aims is to generate a public debate on the state of Britain's press we should not be too alarmed."

The campaign is meaningless, of course, if it is to depend on the goodwill of editors and proprietors — if it existed in the necessary quantities, the campaign would be needless. Therefore the campaign is prepared to talk about negotiation between unions and employers, and to talk about enforcing the right of reply.

It is this which has produced uproar.

Editors and proprietors tend to distinguish between freedom (for them to do as they wish) and censorship (for them to be prevented from doing exactly as they wish). When a newspaper is stopped by industrial action, that is censorship. When it is stopped by management, as in the case of Times Newspapers, that is not.

The campaign makes a different distinction, and one which fits more closely to popular usage.

Censorship is the deliberate suppression of items selected because they offend the censors and their masters.

On this definition there is no question of the Campaign favouring censorship.

Exactly the opposite is true: it is in favour of extending access to the media so that more information and a wider range of views can reach the readers.

If, in the course of winning what most people regard as natural justice — the right of reply when unfairly attacked — it is necessary to prevent temporarily a publication, that is unfortunate; but it is not censorship.

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Who will safeguard the right of reply? GEOFFREY SHERIDAN asks where people should take complaints

# Workers press councils the answer

TWO kinds of criticism are levelled against the mainstream press and broadcasting.

The first is that there is an essentially free press in Britain marred by certain excesses of sensationalism, lack of taste, and occasional lapses of judgment in relation to the causes it takes up and the means by which it pursues them.

This is the approach that lies behind the Press Council, with its 'watchdog' role of accepting complaints from the public and requesting editors to publish its findings when complaints are investigated.

There is another kind of criticism which is far removed from the first. It is that the mass media both in their form of ownership and editorial control overwhelmingly represent capitalist interests; that the span of political views it presents is limited to that of the Tory Party and (in a few cases) the Callaghan wing of the Labour Party.

As for the public's chance of obtaining redress against the press . . . In some recent years the proportion of successful complaints to the Press Council has been 4.06 per cent and 4.51 per cent. In short, it's not so much a watchdog as a lapdog.

With the withdrawal of the journalist union's representatives from the Press Council, such credibility as it has clung on to can be rapidly removed. What, then, of the alternatives?

It is evident that the mere issuing of reprimands — from whatever alternative source — against a mass media which almost without exception day in and day out presents a Tory-eye view of the world will have nil impact.

At the national level, the TUC and the Labour Party should be called on to set up a workers' press council. At the local level, every trades council should join with the women's movement, the black community, gay organisations and every other organisation representing victims of the media's bias, to form local workers' press councils.

In the NUJ's code of conduct, to which each member is signatory, there is a clause which states: "A journalist shall rectify promptly any harmful inaccuracy, ensure

that corrections and apologies receive due prominence and afford the right of reply to persons criticised when the issue is of sufficient importance."

Until now only an NUJ member could bring a complaint under the code against another member, but the last union conference decided that a complaint could be taken up by a member on behalf of anyone.

While that is a favourable development, and there needs to be extensive publicity in the labour movement about the existence of the 12-point code of conduct, the fact remains that there has never been a successful complaint brought under over the issue of bias or the failure to seek the right of reply.

The basic explanation is that few journalists on the national press or broadcasting accept the code or are prepared to countenance any union criticism of their work. The story is a little different on the local press, where a number of journalist chapels have taken action over racist, sexist, and anti-union coverage.

During the discussion on press freedom at the 1979 Trades Union Congress and at various meetings since, officials of the print union NATSOPA have said that those with grievances against the press should bring them to their union, and NATSOPA members will take the action necessary to ensure that a reply is published.

That should be taken as an open invitation by workers' press councils at the national and local level. The process is not, of course, automatic. There will need to be much discussion between labour movement activists and workers in the print and broadcasting industries. In the localities especially, that discussion ought to be urged now.

At national level, a TUC-Labour Party press council could also carry out such monitoring, expose the nature of media bias, initiate and suggest action to counter it, and promote an alternative workers' media.

Discussion over alternatives to the Press Council is already underway. Campaign for Press Freedom — which bridges the media unions and the wider workers' movement — can play a valuable role in stimulating that discussion.

## Right of Reply: a statement

THE Campaign for Press Freedom, which is supported by 16 trade unions, is officially launching a campaign to establish the right of reply for people who have been seriously misrepresented in the Press. The new campaign has already won enthusiastic support within the labour movement. All the major trade unions organising workers in the newspaper industry (from print room operatives to journalists) endorsed a motion for the TUC at Brighton which calls for the right of reply.

The Campaign for the Right of Reply is based on a simple principle. If individuals or groups have been seriously misrepresented in a newspaper or magazine, they should have a chance to put their case to the readers of that publication. Letters pages sometimes offer this facility, but there is no guarantee that letters will be published; and a letter is not always sufficient to counteract a major piece of news coverage which may have extended over many days.

The Campaign for the Right of Reply is not in favour of censorship. On the contrary, it is in favour of extending access to the media so that more information and a wider range of views can reach the readers. It does not favour 'blacking' of copy, nor does it intend to interfere with the normal autonomy of editors.

Only in exceptional cases of distortion, concerning issues already defined as having major significance in that area, would steps be taken to enforce the right of reply. Where an individual or group has been seriously misrepresented by a newspaper or magazine, and requests the right of reply, this could in certain circumstances become a matter for negotiation between the employer and unions concerned. The Campaign is intended to generate wide-ranging discussions on the subject of news coverage and press freedom.

## Commission

THE COMMISSION to investigate the Press Council, set up by the Campaign, will be starting to meet shortly with the following terms of reference.

To examine as a matter of urgency the setting up of a genuinely independent system of monitoring the press and broadcasting which would provide a forum for complaints by the public and ensure the right of reply for victims of bias and distortion, taking into account the need for (i) speedy action, (ii) effective redress, (iii) financial independence and (iv) a structure and membership which would be broadly representative and would at the same time command credibility with all parties.

In particular to consider:

1. Whether the system should be statutory or non-statutory;
2. Whether the same system should cover both the press and broadcasting;
3. Whether investigation should be separate from adjudication.

## Press on

# GMWU supports press freedom

ONE OF the latest recruits to the Campaign is the giant General and Municipal Workers Union.

The union's annual Congress debated a call for a national Labour daily, which was referred to the executive. Supporting the principle, but urging caution, national officer David Warburton warned that the economic implications had to be studied very carefully.

THE TABLES were turned when the Campaign held its first fringe meeting at the National Graphical Association biennial delegate meeting: delegates listened to an industrial reporter.

*The Times'* labour editor, Paul Routledge, joined Kent branch secretary Ray Allen at a packed lunchtime meeting to support the campaign. "We must join with the journalists to press for the presentation of a more radical point of view", said Mr Allen.

And Mr Routledge said: "The long-term value of the campaign must be a real change in attitudes within the industry."

The conference itself refused to back a motion calling for nationalisation of the press, on the advice of the National Council to whom it was referred: George Jerrom said he did not want to see other parts of the motion supporting the campaign fall.

THE WELSH Language Society, Cymdeithas Yr Iaith Gymraeg, agreed at its annual meeting to a motion backing each of the Campaign's seven aims, and urging people to join up.

The meeting instructed its Senate and officials to co-operate with other Campaign members in setting up a Welsh section.

THE CAMPAIGN has taken part in an increasing number of meetings and conferences every month, including a day-long session in Leeds which it jointly sponsored with the TUC and National Union of Journalists.

Requests for speakers, or help in setting up meetings, should be made to the Campaign secretary or to Jake Ecclestone, Campaign chairman, who works at *The Times* and has agreed to co-ordinate requests.

THE SOCIETY of Graphical and Allied Trades pledged its full support for the Campaign when it held its first Delegate Meeting since the launch. Mike Hicks, of London Central branch, said that the policies on press freedom should become "part of the fabric" of the union.

The motion also expressed concern at the monopoly trend in the media and demanded a newsprint subsidy to prevent further closures; measures to ensure a "more equitable distribution of advertising to newspapers and journals"; government-financed printing plant; and nationalisation of the newsprint industry.

THE LAW OF contempt is to be the subject of a pamphlet being prepared by the National Council for Civil Liberties. The Campaign will be helping with its publication.

# Shock news, low standards

THE MERGER of London's two evening papers, the *News* and *Standard*, will mark the final extinction of competition among evening papers in the United Kingdom. The people who work on these two papers found out in what was supposed to be a routine call to Whitehall. In any industry that would suggest industrial democracy had a long way to go. In the newspaper industry it also suggests that management holds any practical notion of press freedom in utter contempt.

EXPRESS Newspapers (owners of the *Standard*) showed their contempt for press freedom earlier this year too, when it refused to print all of an advert taken by the print union NATSOPA in defence of the Day of Action, called by the TUC with that union's support. Management simply refused to print one of the paragraphs (on "legal advice" which didn't stop other newspapers publishing the advert without any comeback). And it used its own editorial space to denounce the advert: their bit of the press was certainly free — NATSOPA paid for its, and still couldn't say what it wanted.

THE CAMPAIGN is going halves with the Minority Press Group to published a new pamphlet, *The Other Secret Service* — describing the French system of news distribution and how it might be fitted to a British framework. Distribution has been a neglected element in the unfree press, the pamphlet argues, and we should seriously consider imitating the French statutory right to be distributed.

Copies are to be sent free to all Campaign members.

AIMS GROUP Six, on the Press Council, is meeting at 7pm on Tuesday October 28 in the Lucas Arms (upstairs), 245 Grays Inn Road, London WC1 (near King's Cross tube). All Campaign members welcome: further details from Geoffrey Sheridan, 01-359 8180/9.

INDIVIDUAL membership of the Campaign costs £3. Organisations can affiliate for an annual fee at the following rates, depending on size of membership. Less than 1,000 — £5; between 1,000 and 10,000 — £10; between 10,000 and 50,000 — £15; 50,000 to 100,000 — £25; more than 100,000 — £50.

Write to John Jennings giving your name — or the name of your organisation and its secretary — and address.

Cheques should be made payable to Campaign for Press Freedom.

*Free Press* is free to Campaign members and is published by the Campaign for Press Freedom, 274-288 London Road, Hadleigh, Essex SS7 2DE.

AT THE Campaign's first annual meeting a new national committee was elected with the power to co-opt additional members. Its membership is now:

Jake Ecclestone (chairman); John Jennings (secretary); Bill Keys, Charles Landry, James Curran, John Mitchell, Michael Meacher, George Jerrom, Vincent Hanna, Mike Jemson, Anna Coote, Marion Bowman, Jane Gaber, Scarlet McGwire, Jenny Rathbone, Sue Honeyford, Nick Grant, Eric Smythe, Joe Lynch, Geoff Sheridan, Geoff Robertson, Harold Frayman (treasurer).

GEOFFREY ROBERTSON, a lawyer and campaign sponsor, says that broadcasters are facing the possibility of trial in their very own Star Chamber.

## Controlling the broadcasters

IN THE SPACE of three short hours, the Commons Committee on the Broadcasting Bill approved the construction of a special court to judge radio and television programmes: the Broadcasting Complaints Commission.

It will comprise "three wise men" with no media links, appointed by the Home Secretary to "adjudicate upon complaints of unjust or unfair treatment . . . or unwarranted infringement of privacy".

It will sit in secret to consider complaints from individuals (alive or dead), companies, clubs and foreign countries.

Annan conceived the complaints commission as part and parcel of its proposals for public accountability: it wanted an inquiry board to conduct public hearings which would gauge popular dissatisfaction, and an opportunity for individuals to complain about misrepresentation.

The Broadcasting Complaints Commission, as it has emerged, is no longer an exercise in accountability. It is an exercise in control. It will become another means of levering television and radio into a straitjacket which could never be contemplated for newspapers, books or plays.

It is not an effective method for securing a 'right of reply' for persons whose actions have been distorted, and its function is far removed from the desirable end of providing a speedy correction of untruths.

The Annan Committee conceived the BCC as a court of last resort, which would sit only on cases which had been mishandled by the broadcasters themselves. The worst structural defect of the Bill is that it makes the BCC first stop for the aggrieved: there is no provision for any conciliation before a full-dress investigation is mounted.

For the Government, the BCC has become a policy formulator, a body superimposed on the existing structure of broadcasting. It will answer *instead* of the authorities and its answers will govern the way they must work in future.

The very existence of the BCC will pose a question which would-be makers of programmes must ask before they begin: "Will there be a complaint and, if so, what will the BCC do about it?" The prospect that the BCC will make life uncomfortable even if it rejects the complaint may become, in time, a potent excuse for not making, or not screening, programmes likely to provoke a protest.

## Labour movement's 'yes' to Campaign

FRINGE meetings at the TUC in Brighton and the Labour Party Conference in Blackpool attracted hundreds of people to hear a wide range of speakers.

In Brighton Joe Wade of the NGA outlined the Right of Reply campaign and its background, while Geoffrey Drain of the local government workers union NALGO, described the importance of the Campaign for Press Freedom to workers outside the print industry.

Yorkshire mineworkers' leader Arthur Scargill proposed that the TUC should finance its own daily paper by a small levy on every trade unionist in an affiliated union — and he asked why such a paper should not be distributed free every day to every trade union member.

In Blackpool, former Labour MP Brian Sedgemore launched a stinging attack on the secrecy of government, while Patricia Hewitt, of the National Council for Civil Liberties, denounced the use of the law and government power to suppress information.

Bruce Page, editor of the *New Statesman*, said it was necessary to realise that we lived in a capitalist society and would do so for some time to come: all that could be asked of capitalist newspapers was that they should be competent and competitive. That in itself would mark a step forward from the existing set-up.

Although there were more fringe meetings on press freedom topics at the Labour Party conference than ever before, and the topic was raised regularly through the week's debates, there was nothing on the agenda as such.

But press freedom was the subject of a major debate at this year's TUC on the basis of a motion submitted by the journalists' union and amended, with the backing of the Campaign, to take in the right of reply campaign.

Here is the full text of TUC resolution:

Congress again condemns the persistent anti-union bias of most sections of the media at national and local level and, in particular, denounces the hysterical coverage of the TUC Day of Action on May 14 this year.

Congress believes that the partisan approach of the media to the coverage of trade union matters and the affairs of the wider labour Movement show that a major concern of the industry is the defence of commercial interests rather than the dissemination of information.

In the interests of a genuinely free press, Congress accepts that steps must be taken to defend those who have no voice in the existing media. To this end, Congress welcomes the setting up of the Campaign for Press Freedom and pledges its continued support for alternative press and broadcasting initiatives.

Congress recognises that one safeguard for press freedom lies in strong union organisation within the media industries.

Congress further requests the General Council during the coming year:

- i. to examine alternative use of media resources and to consider setting up a central fund, to which all member unions should be invited to contribute, which would provide financial backing for appropriate press and broadcasting ventures;
- ii. to examine ways in which member unions, particularly those in the press and broadcasting, can apply pressure on newspaper and broadcasting employers to ensure a fair hearing for differing opinions; to encourage the highest standards of journalism and media production; to prevent the victimisation of individuals through editorial bias; and to ensure the right of reply for victims of bias or distortion in the press;
- iii. to examine as a matter of urgency the setting up of a genuinely independent system of monitoring the press and broadcasting which would provide a forum for complaints by the public; and
- iv. in the light of the *British Steel Corporation v Granada TV* judgment in the Court of Appeal, to campaign for a Freedom of Information Bill which will ensure that the media are able to report freely on actions of Government while journalists are able to protect their sources.

*Moved by NUJ; Seconded by SOGAT; Supported by NGA, NATSOPA.*