

Unions say Life-Saving News Needs Support

15 April 2020

<https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/unions-say-life-saving-news-needs-support.html>

With jobs being axed, titles closed, newsrooms reduced to skeletal staffs and journalists left unpaid and unprotected unions are leading demands for urgent action to save our industry, an essential service. This issue we focus on the efforts of one US union to protect journalists and journalism.



Credits: Newsguild

In an unprecedented move, the US NewsGuild-CWA has called on federal, state, provincial, and local governments to provide public funds to sustain news operations. The union claims the 9-point plan is critical to prevent a feared extinction of large parts of the US news industry, particularly local news providers.

They have also demanded that media companies stop axing jobs, furloughing staff and cutting pay.

Journalists from across the industry, meeting at the NewsGuild Executive last week, unanimously backed a far-reaching and comprehensive set of demands to “support an essential service that provides life-saving information” at a time of crisis.

And the plan is already winning support.

In its statement, the union recognized that any plan must recognize that “*accurate, reliable local, regional and national journalism is an essential service*” and called for public financing. But wary of accusations that such financing could be used to control the message the union is adamant that a fund to support journalism must be regulated in the public interest.

The union’s statement argues “*the federal government should establish a publicly-financed fund to support newsrooms and media workers to prevent layoffs. Such a fund would also serve to promote journalism in news deserts in all 50 states and territories to supplement or fund additional positions in private-sector news organizations, but not be used to replace existing employees...the fund should be regulated to ensure news organizations remain independent and workers should be involved in any such public funding mechanism*”.

The union also demands that employers who want to access the funds must:

- Remain independent
- Demonstrate financial need and report on the use of funds
- Be prohibited from using public money for executive bonuses, dividends or stock buybacks for five years. Executive compensation should be capped at twice that of the editor in chief.
- Be prohibited for five years from engaging in mergers and acquisition activity or leveraged buyouts that result in job losses or pay reductions.
- Adhere to the terms of public financing or be subject to a claw back of any public funds, including interest and penalties.
- Not interfere with union organizing campaigns and should be prohibited from hiring anti-union consultants for the purposes of quashing worker organizing drives.
- Promote diversity and equity
- Allocate seats on the board to employee representatives

They say the moves are essential to protect journalism at a time when cuts are undermining the industry’s ability to provide citizens with the information they need.

“In this crisis, it’s essential that we invest in and retain journalists and other media workers, especially in local communities where Americans need to know when schools and businesses are open, where testing centers are and what the current case and death totals are. The financialization of the industry has reduced the number of journalists available to share life-saving information during this crisis. This cannot be allowed to continue” the statement reads.

No-interest loans and fiscal and tax reliefs

The union also argues that the Small Business Administration should make available no-interest loans for the creation of news start-ups, including non-profits and employee-owned co-ops.

They also urge the use of fiscal and tax rules to support the industry by:

- Making tax-deductible the cost of subscriptions for any news product.
- Providing incentives for local ownership and community interests to own media.
- Establishing a nationwide advertising purchasing program to promote topics of national interest.

The union has also written to congressional leaders that such public funding must be a priority in the next stimulus package

In their letter the union warned “more Americans will die” if they cannot access the critical information news outlets provide.

TNG-CWA President Jon Schleuss said the union’s goal in calling for a stimulus package is twofold: *“Save and protect the jobs in the news industry now without supporting hedge funds and private equity groups who pillaged our workforce. Seed a future that promotes a sustainable news industry supported by the public.”*

Schleuss said that Guild members across the U.S. and Canada *“have been working tirelessly to provide accurate information to our communities about the coronavirus pandemic. This kind of important journalism is needed more than ever right now.”*

“But the news industry’s very ability to provide that information, at a time when it is needed most, is at risk”

Jeremy Dear, IFJ Deputy General Secretary