

## Why the Guild matters today

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Good jobs, good benefits and a just society depend on workers acting together.

Five years before the Newspaper Guild was founded in 1933, Chicago reporters Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur wrote "The Front Page," a play inspired by their own journalistic misadventures, many of them with Hearst newspapers. Hearst executive Walter Howey was the model for the comedy's scheming, ruthless newspaper editor, Walter Burns. To keep hero Hildy Johnson from leaving Burns' Chicago paper, the editor hires an Italian mobster, corrupts a city policeman and frames Johnson for a crime he did not commit, all the while terrorizing his other employees.

Hecht himself truly disliked his former boss Howey, who had one glass eye that Hecht said was easy to spot "because it was the warm one." Quitting a job and then making money writing about it is a therapeutic opportunity chiefly available to those with good Hollywood or Broadway connections. Hecht and MacArthur continued their collaboration after "The Front Page," but Hecht missed the excitement of daily journalism, along with the political influence and social standing his gritty life-in-the-city articles gave him in Al Capone's Chicago. After saying goodbye to all that and moving to California, Hecht remarked, "I am a Hollywood writer, so I put on my sports jacket and take off my brain."

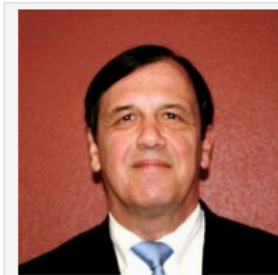
"The Front Page's" portrayal of dreary working circumstances populated by abused and vulnerable media workers on the cusp of the Great Depression was not an exaggeration. Hecht's and MacArthur's departure from their newspapers was a happy ending in comparison to the situation of journalists they left behind in Chicago, who were subject to the whims of their employers and the vagaries of larger economic forces. Traditionally independent editorial workers were then paid less than unionized typesetters; they worked without job protection, and they received minimal benefits. This vastly unequal employer-employee relationship began to be put right only when Franklin Roosevelt's election in 1932 brought New Deal labor legislation and the Newspaper Guild brought collective bargaining to newsrooms. The Guild was started by Heywood Hale Broun and two other reporters, who called on workers to band together and use their collective power to obtain a fair deal for themselves and their fellow workers.

Since American movie audiences love winners, even the ones who win by cheating, when "The Front Page" was made into a film, Hollywood heartthrob Adolphe Menjou was cast as the Burns character, which earned Menjou an Oscar nomination. Hildy Johnson was played by Hollywood nice guy Pat O'Brien. Thanks to Internet video streaming and Wikipedia, Howey's memory is alive today, chiefly for his connection with Hecht's and MacArthur's script, not for his long career with Hearst. In real life, the era's winners were the journalists who banded together to form the Guild and used their collective power to improve working conditions for themselves and those who came after them. They raised salaries, improved working conditions, created pension plans, and got health insurance for workers and their families.

In a different time, where the front page is morphing into the homepage, the Guild's tradition of social activism and social awareness makes it as important as ever in ensuring social justice and fairness for working people. "The union makes us strong," a refrain from an old union organizing song of the last century, still is true today. All employees deserve a decent wage, decent working conditions, health insurance for their families and a pension from the industry at which they spend their working years. The Guild and other unions force public policymakers to confront these issues and make them part of the public discourse. And not only does the Guild participate in these debates, its members also report them.

The current debate over economic inequality in the United States and other nations has largely ignored the role of unions in maintaining fair economic relations between employer and employees, and making society at large aware of inequities. That influence is felt even in industries with minimal union representation. Child labor and safety laws, old-age and disability pensions, employer-sponsored health insurance, paid vacations, and protections against arbitrary firings or work discipline all have their origins in the labor movement. In today's economy – where some workers struggle to make do on low wages, food stamps and government assistance, while their employers benefit from preferential tax regimes and other schemes that have little benefit for their workers – unions have an even more important role to play in the public debate over the social responsibilities of corporations and those that benefit from corporate privileges, financial and otherwise.

Workers can best protect themselves and their families when they act together, and society as a whole benefits from the power of collective employee action. The Guild is as important today in achieving those ends as it was at its founding more than 80 years ago.



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