
Letter from Robert Minor in New York to the Editorial Committee, WPA, February 24, 1923.

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February 24, 1923

To the EDITORIAL COMMITTEE
of the Workers Party.

Dear Comrades:

The writer makes the following suggestions to you for the improvement of the Party press. You will find some of them to be rather drastic. They are intended to be so. The writer, as a member of the Editorial Committee, has a deep conviction that, in the first place, our papers are not fully making use of the opportunities now before them, and in the second place, that we are now entering into a new period which would require an overhauling and a readjustment of our press even if it were adequate to the present period. If I am wrong in my belief that the press has not lived up to its past opportunities, you must surely agree that the Party and the country in which it operates are entering into a much different condition and that the press should respond to the change.

When I make severe and caustic complaints, I trust that no one will think I am criticizing any one editor individually. My opinion is that we are all responsible for the faults that exist — I as much as any.

A glance through any one of our papers is likely to show, in tendency, at least, the following condition:

The first impression is likely to be that the paper is an advertisement. In the case of *The Worker*, the title line of the paper is so big and black (to say nothing of its raggedness) as to make the biggest possible headline look small and weak in comparison. I believe in bold headlines. But look, for instance, at the *NY Evening Journal* — a paper that specializes in bold headlines. Its title line is one half as big type as that of *The Worker*,



although its page is bigger than ours. The result is that the *Evening Journal* can carry a much more effective scare headline than *The Worker* can, and requires half the space to get twice the boldness. The technique of this is that the *Journal* title-line is always *one degree smaller than its most prominent*

news headline. It is a question of *relative size*. *The Worker* cannot carry a bold headline, as it is. 72 point Gothic type is obscure, and any other type is obscure, on its first page. This is only slightly less true of our other papers. Throughout our press this one amateurish fault — it is a very amateurish fault, well known among newspapermen — makes our first page ineffective, monotonous, and advertisement-like.

The next thing that is likely to impress the observer is that our headlines do not often offer the prospective reader any inducement to purchase and read. They do not indicate that there is any *information* to be obtained from reading. They do not promise the reader anything of value — in fact our headlines almost invariably indicate not that we are going to give the reader any valuable information, but that we are going to panhandle him for something — service or money. This is the worst possible approach. It is the psychology of a very poor quality of advertisement, not news-head writing. In fact, even the ad writers are abandoning this style and adopting a subtle style of imitating news-heads — writing heads and leads that intrigue the reader to think he will get some sort of *news of events* by reading.

Where our headlines do not beg, they usually do something just as badly calculated to entice the reader: they sermonize. Take a glance over the past ten issues of *The Worker*, examining the headlines, and you will find that they too often place a preachment or a conclusion in their scare type, instead of the indication of the *discovered fact* upon which a conclusion could be based. This is the worst possible method to get and hold steady readers. For instance, the headline, “Labor! How About Arkansas?” (which is chosen at random and is not by any means the worst) does not indicate that we are going to give the reader some interesting information, but that we are going to ask him to do something. It makes the paper seem as something we ought to give away instead of something that the reader ought to pay for. Then take the

headline, “Burns Real ‘Bomb Plotter!’” That line is a *conclusion* and is not news. It is an opinion. I should hope that the reader would come to that conclusion after reading the facts if they are adequately handled, but the headline does not indicate to a worker with a hesitating hand at his pocket that the paper will give him any information — it indicates that it will only express an opinion of an organization that has a special interest to advocate. With the average doubtful reader, it is calculated to rouse a suspicious attitude. He feels toward it exactly the attitude he has toward an advertisement. Such headlines as the two mentioned are written on exactly the same plan as advertisements saying “Workmen, How About our Shoes at \$3.98,” or “Jones’ Suits Are Real Wool Worsteds.” They arouse the same suspicious sensation of something being put over on the reader instead of the sensation of some startling revelation to be made.

I think it is generally agreed that the makeup of our papers has made them difficult to read; but there has been some improvement. I think that the difficulty of too-long stories beginning on page one and skipping to an inside page will largely be overcome if the resolution already made to make the stories shorter is carried out and if we improve the matter of headlines. But my own opinion is that the read key to the tiresomeness of this process of chasing stories through the paper lies in the quality of the articles, which often are not interesting enough to induce the reader to follow them out.

Many of our writers have a lack of technical training and a consequent overenthusiasm of style which cause them to make their articles almost valueless from the standpoint of *information*. They do not write facts, they write sermons. In fact, nearly everything that appears in our papers is a *sermon*. You may justify this subjectively, but it gets damned tiresome for the reader and he soon quits reading (as our circulation figures show). Any facts that may be dealt with are usually already

known, are often casually referred to, and seldom put [events] in a new, interesting light. Every article, almost, either begins or ends with an exhortation to do something — usually something that the reader is not really expected to do nor indeed has any possibility of doing. The result is that after reading any issue of any of our papers, reading another becomes a deadly duty that none but the most faithful Party member will perform, and he gets a tendency to become petrified mentally from doing it. After a few weeks of groping in our press, a reader gives up any hope of finding anything informative in it. He learns to regard all of its “calls to action” as meant only in a Pickwickian sense — as a formal ritual which has no connection to reality.

I think we have altogether too many “calls to action” in our press. I don’t think that we ought to call for a “Strike and Boycott of Arkansas” because of lynching there. I couldn’t help wondering who was to strike and what I must quit buying at the grocery store in obedience to this call. And when I read the slogan “Cancel the War Debts” I wondered how in hell I could do it. I think it would have been much better to print a good rewrite, in swinging, vigorous language, of the gruesome facts of the Arkansas lynching, together with the names of the “higher-up” owners of that railroad if the names are obtainable by our famous research department. In the case of the debts, I should have been awfully interested to read a resumé of the sums owed, by whom, and for what; what deal was being put through, who was doing it, who stood to gain by the deal, and how much they contributed to Harding’s campaign fund. But as it is I was bored by reading something that I was sure the writer had no notion would be carried out. In both cases it seemed to me that the part of the journalist was to describe the facts in all their damaging sequences, and to leave it to the Political Committee to issue any slogans and to order them printed.

I think that we shall have to end this busi-

ness of printing slogans and calls for action that we don’t mean and endless sermonizing that we all know by heart.

The effect of this sort of journalism is, for one thing, absolutely and hopelessly to damn our Party as not being a party of action. In those pages of our papers which are not specifically set aside for editorials, there should never be published any headline or article that reads as an appeal, argument, or plea to the reader to do something. Drastic as this may seem, it should be adhered to in every case rigidly, except when the Party authority orders a deviation from the rule in a specific case for a specific call for action. This is necessary in order to establish in the minds of our readers that when our papers directly call for an action it is a serious affair attended by plans for action that are going to be carried out. In the past, “radical” papers have represented *philosophical* groups — not organizations for action. They have been organs for the purpose of indicating what, in the logic of their theory, *ought* to be done in each arising event. Events are to them only material for restating their point of view — a means of explaining what could be done IF enough people would only accept their philosophy. That method was justified in the past and is still valid for such organizations as the SLP and the Single Tax League. What I meant when I said that we stand at the beginning of a new period is that no longer is philosophical persuasion in complete detachment from action possible. The basic reason for building our new Party is that we must have an organization that does not speak without its speech being translated into action. We must build our press in the form of such a working instrument that it will never say to the proletarian public “strike” or “boycott” or “demonstrate” without tools being laid down, a definite boycott being established, or a good-sized demonstration actually occurring.

We cannot afford to say “Wolf!” when there is no wolf. We must get the masses of workers to

know that we are responsible and that anyone who takes our calls seriously will not find himself a solitary fool.

Another effect of the kind of journalism we have been practicing is to deprive ourselves entirely of a reading public: The circulation management has reported a very interesting situation — it appears that we GET new subscribers, all right, but that for the most part they quit after sampling our intellectual wares for a few weeks. In spite of great numbers of new subscribers being constantly added to our lists by enormous effort of Party agitators, the net total of subscribers goes not up, but down. The Business Office appears to be resigned to losing *most* of the new subscribers that come in, on the theory that it has always been so with “radical” papers; the members of an audience get stirred up by a speaker to the point of enthusiasm where they take a short-time subscription, but when the meeting is over their enthusiasm cools off and they don’t bother to read the paper or renew subscription; and this, having always been so, must be our continued fate.

I think we must absolutely reject this theory.

It is true that if we continue getting out the kind of papers we have printed in the past, we must expect *anybody’s* enthusiasm to cool off in reading them. This applies not only to the “tired working man” whom we may have persuaded to subscribe. A recent canvas among a small number of Party workers who were asked “Do you read the Party’s weekly organs and do you find them interesting and informative?” resulted in apologetic excuses from almost everyone interrogated. Not a single Party worker interrogated but made plain that he thought he ought to read the Party papers, but that he found it a terribly dreary task. This is the “dreary task” that we expect the only slightly interested and often unfacile readers among the workers to pay us for the privilege of performing.

I think we shall have to reject the theory that it is the platform orator’s job to keep the workers

ribbed up to a sense of duty to read papers which do not of themselves attract interest, or to rib them into paying for a paper without reading it.

I think it is the *press’s* business to build up the press. Our papers must carry their way from hand to hand because of the spontaneous interest they arouse by their contents. I believe that to do this (aside from the mechanical reforms I mentioned) the following measures are indispensable:

1) A sharp distinction should be made between *editorial* matter and articles of fact recital, which we’ll call *news*. That sermonizing shall be severely relegated to editorials which shall appear, except on unusual occasions, on pages regularly allotted to editorials. That “news” articles shall never carry sermons at the beginning nor at the end nor in the middle. That the propaganda effect shall be obtained as the *New York Times* gets its propaganda effect in news articles — by sequence and juxtaposition of fact and by analytical treatment in the news writing, without permitting one sentence or phrase of opinion to be printed in a news item. Difficult as this may seem in view of the fact that we publish weekly with material most of which is gathered from dailies, it can be done. I myself have worked on a “Sunday edition” which was composed entirely of “rewrite” and which depended for its very successful appeal solely upon putting the stories from a new angle and a more interesting way. Even *Tom Mooney’s Monthly* does this successfully.

2) We should apply rigidly to every “news” story the well-known technical standard which prevails in every big newspaper office: That the first paragraph of every news story must completely establish the subject of the story, i.e., about whom or what, when the thing happened, where it happened, and what caused it. It is expressed in the motto: “WHO OR WHAT? HOW? WHEN? WHERE? — MUST BE ANSWERED IN THE FIRST PARAGRAPH.”

3) The chief business of our editors should be — EXPOSÉS. There should never be an issue

of any paper of ours that does not contain either the beginning or the continuation of a dramatic exposure of some phase of capitalist life. I don't mean a tirade written from a swivel chair. I mean, *get the facts* and compile them, fact upon fact in good old muckraking style — names, dates, places. I know there is material, and twenty times more than enough. There is hardly an issue of a morning paper but gives a good lead for an exposé that could be kept running four or five weeks. For instance, as I write I glance at the morning paper for an example: On the first page I find the story of the quarrel between John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and his prohibition agent Pussyfoot Johnson, through whom the young “Crown Prince” of the United States undertook to impose his will upon this country — and succeeded. There is a vast store of exposé material back of this. Get out the dope from the research department; get books on the Rockefeller fortune and how it was made, trace the names and actions of publicity agents, preachers, churches, donations to God and Harding, photo of church, palatial residence, facts regarding wages paid to the young prince's slaves, the battles fought to keep these dollars from the wage slaves at Ludlow and Bayonne, names of victims, women and children killed, ventures of Standard Oil in Mexico, South America, prevention of recognition of Mexico, dishing of Rockefeller fortune into future war with Turkey for oil wells — in other words, the autocracy of the Rockefeller fortune over this country as exposed by a quarrel with his religious agent and also the background. Do you know that Ivy Lee, Rockefeller's publicity agent, has recently begun a heavy propaganda for the League of Nations? Find out when he began it, and how that date corresponds with the dates of events relating to the Turkish oil fields. Name and locate Rockefeller's “pussyfoot” religious agents in Turkish missions, and the same kind in China, all compared up with the march of impe-

rialism as exhibited in diplomatic notes from Washington and with the amounts contributed by Rockefeller and his dummies to the Harding campaign fund. I have not mentioned here a single thing that is not easily traceable in the public library. I have been much impressed lately with the ability of Lovestone at this kind of work as exhibited in his book that is “not yet” published.† Of course he would have to write in a much more popular way for the thing I'm suggesting here. Understand, I don't mean to say merely that the “Pussyfoot Johnson” lead should be used; it is only mentioned for illustration. There are today a dozen more just as good. For instance, almost any week there is a divorce case that would serve as a lead for a serial exposé on “Polygamy of the Big Rich,” such as could have been made at the time the papers revealed that Stillman, President of the Rockefeller bank, had an official wife and an unofficial one, together with a so-called illegitimate child. Then, just a day or two ago there was announced an engagement of one Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney to some young society wench in Europe — which freshens up the fact that a short time ago a young poor girl sued this fellow as the father of her child. Then there was the case of Marshall Field, Jr., and Peggy Marsh and child. There are unlimited possibilities. Take Mr. William E. Borah, who will probably be the next Republican President after Harding. When has his background been exhibited? Who remembers that he won his early political advancement (I think his first) by trying to hang Haywood, Moyer, and Pettybone as special prosecutor in the hire of the mine owners? If the mine owners backed him then, who owns him now? Why did he suddenly change front in 24 hours on international relations? Why did this “radical” remain silent during the coal and railway strike? And so on.

4) Among news stories (distinguished from feature-exposés) a portion of the space of our pa-

†- Reference is to *The Government — Strikebreaker: A Study of the Role of the Government in the Recent Industrial Crisis* by Jay Lovestone, a 370 page hardcover published by the Workers Party of America on May 1, 1923.

pers should be frankly given over to the good, interesting rewrites of “human-interest” and “sex-appeal” stories that appear in the daily papers. I say that every issue of each of our papers should carry two or three stories on SUBJECT MATTER THAT ALREADY OCCUPIES THE MIND OF THE RAWEST WORKER IN HIS LAZIEST MOOD. EVERY ISSUE SHOULD BE MADE INTERESTING TO WORKING CLASS TYPES THAT HAVE NOT YET THE SLIGHTEST INTEREST IN COMMUNISM NOR ANY CONSCIOUS INTEREST IN THE LABOR MOVEMENT. I mean that our press should be able to catch hold of the absolutely RAW MATERIAL of the working class; we cannot be content with press machinery that is adapted to handle only material that has already been half worked over in other propaganda factories. We must work to catch hold of the proletarian masses that have no inclination in our favor except that which is potential, cause by economic determinism. I say that each issue should carry two or three stories that have no obvious political significance whatever, dealing with the kind of scandal affairs to read which our editors (at least, I do) sneak off and buy the *Evening Journal* after finishing their journalistic labors for the day. At least one story of this kind, in each issue, should be complete enough to round out the impression of life as it is. I do not mean to say that these will not have political significance. But they should severely abstain from sermonizing. The mere facts in significant sequence, set in a Communist paper, will be of political significance indirectly and potentially.

* * * †

...there is Ellis of Chicago, who is practically go-

ing to waste, who is sympathetic to our cause, a splendid cartoonist.

This brings up a subject that is close to me personally. Unquestionably there is no lack of cartoonist material, if we want to find cartoonists. Having good cartoons is not at all dependent upon any one man. However, if it should be the opinion of the Committee that I can be allowed the necessary time for it, I should like very much to get back to my old trade. One thing that you will have to understand, however, is that a cartoonist, like a ball player or a fiddle player, cannot draw at all unless he gives his time to it. I suggest to the Committee to consider whether they wish to and can afford to excuse me from all other work except necessary committee meetings and general supervision of *The Liberator*, and allow me to try to get my hand in again at cartoons. I have been out of the thing so long that I can draw only very poorly for the moment, but I have been stealing time for the past few days to try to kick up some of the old style; and I should like to have a chance to get at it in earnest. See if you can afford it. I warn you that it will have to be my major occupation; nobody can do it as a side issue. If you say yes, then don't put me suddenly to writing pamphlets or manifestos. I suggest that I be excused from all obligatory writing; I would probably contribute something now and then. I want to try to get back to pictures; if I find that I can't regain the old punch, then I shall quit it forever.

Faternally,

Robt. Minor

†- Page 12 of the 13 page typewritten letter missing here.

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