“Don’t Lower the Standard”: The Newsroom on Strike

When media tycoon Conrad Black’s Hollinger Inc. bought a majority stake in the Southam newspaper chain in November 1996, journalists took notice. By the end of 1996, Black owned 650 dailies and weeklies around the world. He controlled almost half of Canada’s daily circulation and 70 percent of Ontario’s newspapers, including the *St. Catharines Standard*, which had been locally owned and operated for over a century by the prominent Burgoyne family before being sold in 1996. The change in ownership ushered in dramatic changes for the newspaper’s workforce.

Black had a reputation as a ruthless employer who routinely intervened in editorial policy decisions and engaged in severe cost-cutting at the expense of journalists, for whom he had little regard. More and more, journalists saw unionization as a way of protecting both their trade and their jobs in an increasingly hostile work environment.

In 1997, the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers union (CEP), under the guise of the Southern Ontario Newspaper Guild, organized workers in the *St. Catharines Standard* newsroom. A year later, when the *Standard* insisted on wage rate rollbacks, the union had no choice but to strike. The newsroom staff began walking picket lines in May 1998, and stickers reading “Don’t Lower the *Standard*” started to appear all over the city. The striking workers picketed a Southam newspaper shareholders’ meeting in Toronto, where record profits were reported, while the *Standard* imported scab labour to produce its paper. In an effort to raise awareness of the dispute and put pressure on the *Standard* to settle the contract, the striking workers launched a newspaper of their own, *The Independent*. Striker Andrew Lundy later recounted the experience in a blog post:
In May 1998, the 30-odd newsroom staff at The Standard in St. Catharines went on strike — the first time in the paper’s 100-plus year history — after talks to come up with a first contract broke down.

The reporters, editors and photographers decided that, in addition to picketing, we’d also start our own strike paper, The Independent. There were two main reasons: one, to show the quality of work we were capable of, and two, to drain advertising dollars away from the parent company, hurting them enough to get them bargaining from a more acceptable position.

Working on the paper was one of the hardest things I ever did. While also a member of the bargaining committee, I routinely pulled 18-hour days (as did many of my colleagues) reporting, editing and laying out the paper. Most of the striking reporters wrote good stories, the copy desk edited and laid out a quality publication, and the photogs produced some great pics. We even had an advertising guy who recently retired from The Standard helping sell our ad space.

We published three weekly issues, each of which broke news that The Standard (then staffed by replacement workers and managers) did not, and featured several local advertisers who diverted their money away from The Standard.

The paper was distributed free, so we couldn’t rightly claim to be cutting into the main newspaper, but the ads did help pay for our costs, along with the generous help of CEP (Communications, Energy and Paperworkers), our union. Once the strike was settled, the paper disappeared.

Overall, it was a fun, exhausting, and most would say worthwhile experience.\(^3\)

The Independent was launched on 30 May 1998. Paul O’Brien, Unit Chair of CEP Local 87-M, explained in the first edition of the newspaper that the idea for producing The Independent came from striking newsroom workers in Welland, who had created the Guardian Express years earlier in order to exert pressure on their employer.
to settle a contract. The now-defunct Guardian Express was so well received by the community that it continued to operate for nearly a decade after the strike. In the case of The Independent, the union published roughly 45,000 copies of the twenty-page tabloid-style newspaper, which were distributed weekly, free of charge. The newspaper talked about the labour dispute but also tackled community-wide issues such as restructuring in the automotive sector, cruelty to animals, and mould in portable classrooms.

According to an article in the first edition of The Independent, “the main issues of the labour dispute included wage rollbacks of up to 12 percent for new employees, threats to the photography department, and a gag order that journalists fear attacks the very basis of their craft — free speech.” Unions, community groups, and small businesses kept the weekly newspaper afloat through advertising. In one advertisement, the Niagara New Democratic Youth injected some humour into the politically charged strike by asking: “Q: What’s the difference between Conrad Black and a trampoline? A: You should always take your shoes off before jumping on a trampoline.”

After a three-week strike, the Standard reached a deal with its newsroom staff, and the union ceased publication of the Independent shortly after its 13 June 1998 edition was distributed to the community. Even though most of the workers were proud of their first contract, which included improvements to benefits and language in the collective agreement, roughly a third of them took buyouts or simply left shortly after the strike. Although the union was forced to accept a two-tiered wage system in order to settle the contract, the disparity between the tiers that management was proposing was narrowed significantly as a result of the strike. More importantly, the union remained intact. A strike involving the same publisher, which took place at the Calgary Herald shortly after the Standard strike, ended with the newspaper breaking the back of the union. The newsroom workers at the Standard not only avoided decertification but actually improved their union contract in several key areas.