The revolving door in Winnipeg
Where the F.P. goes round the Guild

by Katie Fitzrandolph

The Newspaper Guild is involved in a fight at the Winnipeg Free Press that most people would have thought was outmoded in the 1920s.

As the union draws close to its second anniversary of organization, there is still no sign of a contract. This is not to say that improvements have not been seen, but they have all been unilateral changes instituted by the company, and all are, quite clearly, attempts to undermine the Guild's strength at the newspaper.

For those not directly involved, a capsule history of a truly classic battle might be in order. While following the history, one might wish to bear in mind that the Free Press is considered the flagship of the F-P chain (by management), and that the chain includes the Guild papers of the Toronto Globe and Mail, the Montreal Star, the Ottawa Journal, the Vancouver Province, the Victoria Times and the Victoria Colonist. The still unguilded papers are the Calgary Albertan and the Lethbridge Herald (the Alberta combo Max Bell brought into the chain).

It might also be worth noting that the Free Press's former publisher, R.S. Malone, is currently at the Globe and Mail.

With that perspective, and the recent memory of a 1970 organizing attempt still fresh, a small group of editorial employees began meeting in January, 1973, with the objective of making the Free Press the guild's first stronghold on the Prairies. In time, another small group in the advertising department was organized.

Everything was co-ordinated for an organizing blitz on the last weekend of May, 1973. On that Monday, Mr. Malone awoke to find that 87.6 percent of the two departments had signed guild cards. Smug faces prevailed in editorial and advertising, as nobody thought such an overwhelming majority could possibly be challenged.
Within weeks, however, an organization called the Free Press Employees Association sprung into existence. It signed up members and tried to organize resignations from the guild.

On July 6, 1973, The Newspaper Guild, Local 233, was certified by the Manitoba labour board to represent the Free Press's editorial and advertising employees.

The Lord was their shepherd

That triggered a court battle that was to last until the end of January, the following year. The Free Press challenged the labour board's certification on three grounds: (1) The labour board was not properly constituted, as its chairman, Murdoch MacKay, had resigned to run in a provincial election. (2) The labour board could not judge impartially on this particular case because Manitoba Premier Ed Schreyer had expressed delight at the Guild's organizing drive, and provincial Labor Minister A.R. (Russ) Paulley had been equally delighted (The labour board's decision to certify had been unanimous), and (3) Some of the guild cards signed were invalid because they had been signed on a Sunday, thereby violating The Lord's Day Act.

These three objections were laughed cut of Court of Queen's Bench in the fall of 1973, and subsequently the company soberly took them on to the Manitoba Court of Appeal, where the court decided unanimously in favor of The Guild.

During this period of litigation, the Guild obtained two orders from the provincial labour board to commence bargaining but the company declined to negotiate while the suit was still pending.

After its defeat at Court of Appeal, the company sat down to negotiate in February, 1974. (In the interim, editorial and advertising employees of Southam's Winnipeg Tribune had been organized and certified into the Guild.)

It should be noted, about the time of the Guild's certification at The Free Press, substantial wage increases were announced. An unprecedented "cost of living" increase followed in October, 1973.

Watch that undertime!

From the beginning, negotiations dragged. Guild settlements at other F-P papers were irrelevant, the company said. Night differentials were preposterous. If the guild wanted overtime, it should consider "undertime".
This rather unusual concept in labour relations would work under the following circumstances. If a night reporter were working 4 to midnight, and had no assignments until 8 p.m., there were four hours during which he was not producing stories. If his 8 p.m. meeting lasted until 1:30 a.m. and he took until 4 a.m. writing the stories from it, the four extra hours overtime should be deducted from the four previous hours "undertime" thus leaving him even for the evening's work.

By spring of 1974, however, the Free Press decided to abide by provincial hours of work legislation and started paying overtime to its employees, at the legally-required time-and-a-half. (The company has paid overtime for statutory holidays for some years.)

Negotiations continued to drag. Company negotiators weren't available. Meetings couldn't be scheduled. Guild proposals were "of no conceivable benefit" to the company. One of these was the request for bi-weekly pay, rather than cheques on the 15th and 31st.

At the Tribune, negotiations flourished. Severance pay was agreed to. (The Free Press didn't need it because it never fired anyone. The Guild argued that it would therefore be a cheap clause to include. The company argued it was unnecessary. An afternoon was spent running around that tree.)

The Winnipeg Tribune meanwhile continued negotiations on a contract and as we go to press, ratification seemed close.

In late 1974, the Free Press unit of the Guild was facing an application for certification on behalf of something called the Independent Newspaper Employees Association, basically the same old company association under a new name.

**VOTED 2-1 FOR THE GUILD**

Because the application was in order, the Labour board called a vote, and in mid-January, Free Press editorial and advertising employees voted nearly two to one in favor of continuing with the Guild.

Shortly thereafter, Free Press management instituted the wage scale the Guild had negotiated at the Tribune, including a 10 per cent night differential. Rumors circulated that the same three-week vacation policy the Guild had negotiated at the Tribune would be in effect at the Free Press. And by mid-March, Free Press employees were being paid every other week, which now had a "conceivable benefit" to the company as a new computer
being introduced was much more readily programmed to bi-weekly pay cheques.

From a situation where guild contracts anywhere else were totally irrelevant to the Free Press, the company switched to the view that it couldn't bargain with the Guild until it had seen a signed contract with The Tribune.

And as the second anniversary comes up, with no contract in sight, employees at The Free Press still wonder exactly where they stand. They still don't know what their rights are. Rumor is still the most exact source of information. New strategies crop up (one reporter was suspended for three weeks just before Christmas over "an error in news judgment").

MEANWHILE SALARIES INCREASED

But a lot has been accomplished on the sides. Overtime is paid. A night differential is in operation. Nobody gets less than the Manitoba minimum wage. Salaries have increased about 75 per cent. And nobody is fighting all alone, because everyone has the Guild behind them.

Nirvana, it ain't. You don't get nirvana even with a first contract. But the positive result of the Guild at The Free Press are but an indication of what will come in the future. The fact that a 2-1 majority still backs the Guild after the pressures and buy-off tactics of 18 months is a good indication of the backbone of that organization at The Free Press.

And anyone who out-of-hand condemns all unions as grasping, grabbing power-hungry organizations, should step back into the 1920s and find out what the fight is all about. Walk through the revolving door at 300 Carlton Street, and experience the living past as no museum could give it to you.

ARCHIE BUNKERISM: EXCUSE HIS FRENCH

Recently, the magazine "Quebec Science", published by L'Universite de Quebec, sent out 625 letters across Canada as part of an advertising drive. Apparently they thought that Windsor, which has a bilingual population in part, would be a good bet and so the firm Tamco Limited got one of the letters. Alas, its president Leonard Neal, responded with an Archie Bunker knee jerk, to say, "No one where I am employed speaks the French-Canadian language, nor do they really have any interest in learning to speak it." As though that wasn't enough, Neal concluded with the hope that "in the next few years, we can all blend together in this wonderful country to make sure we have one country, one language, freedom for all."