

# **Six-Member Union Stalls Deal For Sun-Times Media Group**

## **Chicago Typographical Union No. 16 not eager to give up lifetime jobs rights**

By Michael Oneal

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When a bankruptcy judge in Delaware approved Chicago financier Jim Tyree's \$26.5 million bid to save Sun-Times Media Group Inc. from extinction last week, Steve Berman and the six members of the Chicago Typographical Union No. 16 heard about it from the media like everybody else.

The stories said the company's largest union, the Chicago Newspaper Guild, had finally agreed to Tyree's terms. And Sun-Times management casually predicted that agreements with two holdout bargaining units would be "reached in the coming days."

What the stories didn't say was that the company's smallest union, Berman's CTU, hadn't even scheduled a vote and had no intention of doing so until it saw a little more flexibility from management.

"I don't know what the judge was told," said Berman, the union's president. "It's an awkward position to be in."

On Friday, a union representing editorial workers in northwest Indiana approved the Tyree concessions. But as of Monday, the six typographers still were holding out after roundly rejecting management's first offer in early September.

Berman explained that while the CTU members are keenly aware that the rest of the company's 1,800 employees are counting on them to reach an agreement so that the Tyree deal can finally go through, they also believe management has unfairly asked them to put their own jobs in jeopardy.

Their trump card is one of those relic union contracts that give members rights that seem mind-boggling in this day and age. In 1975, when the union had 460 members at the Sun-Times and was far stronger, the CTU managed to negotiate lifetime job guarantees that subsequently kept some members on the payroll well into their 80s, Berman said.

At the time, Sun-Times management saw more value in being able to move union members around between jobs than in being able to lay them off. The union happily agreed, given that the days of printing the newspaper using lead "hot type" were gone and members saw desktop publishing gradually replacing their typesetting work altogether.

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While it seems unlikely that either Sun-Times management or Tyree would allow their deal to founder on the shoals of a six-person union, they haven't done much to win over the typographers so far.

Management's first proposal was that CTU members not only give up their lifetime job guarantees but sign over both severance rights and any assurance of further work with the company. After rejecting that proposal as a nonstarter weeks ago, Berman finally got a new one Monday and is mulling it with his membership.

"I can't sign a document that gives the company the ability to discharge my people without any assurances," Berman said, adding, "we're not running to vote on this one."

Sun-Times Chairman Jeremy Halbreich wouldn't comment on the CTU negotiations specifically but said it has been the company's "intent to reach agreement with all our bargaining units, and they're included."

Tyree was unavailable for comment.

That the CTU exists today is a testament to the power of that 1975 contract. The union, which Berman said started in 1852, represents the remnants of a profession that has been on the wane for decades.

Berman said the lifetime employment guarantee survived a string of ownership changes and kept many typographers working into their old age. The union has dwindled mostly through attrition and buyouts as graphic designers in editorial and advertising departments gradually took over the work. The last buyout came in March 2008, Berman said, shaving 12 out of the 18 remaining jobs.

The six workers today mostly set up pages of ads and classifieds that come in close to deadline and can't be handled by the other departments or outsourcers. The jobs pay an average of \$45,000; the six workers are mostly in their 60s, Berman said.

Berman said the union has no intention of upsetting the Tyree deal and hopes it can work something out soon. The quickest way to solve the problem, he said, would be more buyouts, but that's not on the table at the moment.

"Our goal is to remain a two-newspaper town," Berman said. "We want to get this complete in the quickest and most responsible way possible."

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