

and Ethiopia, whose proposal for a series of dams at the headwaters of the Blue Nile has exacerbated tensions with downstream Egypt.

Before arguments have even begun, the World Court has already called into question the assumption that being located upstream through the luck of geography gives a country the right

to determine the use of a river, leaving what remains to the people living downstream. Whatever the Court decides, the Hungarians' challenge is, for the first time, giving legal voice to the claim that all resources are, ultimately, shared resources. "This case," says Schwartz, "will have enormous impact on the handling of disputes over international water resources into the next century." ■

THE MOMENT IS RIPE FOR A DAILY NEWSPAPER TELLING WORKERS' SIDE OF THE STORY.

## An Appeal to Reason

SCOTT SHERMAN

Five days a week, 1.8 million people reach for *The Wall Street Journal*, a newspaper that does much to nourish and strengthen the world of commerce. But the *Journal's* influence transcends that milieu. Along with *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, it delineates the boundaries of acceptable political discourse while at the same time establishing an agenda for television and radio news. It does so, of course, from the perspective of business and the private sector, whose ideology trickles down the media food chain accordingly.

If stockbrokers, lawyers and bankers have a first-rate daily newspaper looking after their interests, why isn't there one for auto workers, clerks, janitors and the rest of us? That is to say, a national paper exempt from the control of corporations, Wall Street and Rupert Murdoch; a paper that covers crime in the suites as passionately as crime in the streets; a paper that revives the muckraking tradition of Upton Sinclair, Lincoln Steffens and Ida Tarbell. In short, a paper that does for working people what the *Journal* does for business people.

A paper that debunked lies, talked back to power and articulated a program for democratic renewal—one that included universal health care, environmental protection, worker empowerment, government and corporate accountability, etc.—would probably be read by the various constituencies of the left. More important, it might also appeal to a much larger audience whose members don't read *The Nation*, *Mother Jones* or *The American Prospect* but are concerned about the rightward trajectory of U.S. politics and the Murdochization of popular culture. This group includes college students, senior citizens and immigrants, as well as workers hurt by stagnant wages and rising inequality. Bruce Colburn and Joel Rogers argue that "the liberal-conservative axis itself misses the real conflict in politics today—which is not so much a battle between left and right as between bottom and top" [see "What's Next?" November 18, 1996]. If that's correct, this should be a paper for the bottom, broad enough to appeal to those who cheer Patrick Buchanan.

It's odd that the United States lacks a progressive daily. Such papers exist, in one form or another, in Britain, France, Germany,



South Korea and Mexico. Take Mexico City's *La Jornada*. Founded in 1984 by a group that included Gabriel García Márquez and Carlos Fuentes, this stylish tabloid defends workers and the poor while aggressively exposing government and private-sector corruption. With an estimated readership of 200,000, *La Jornada* functions as the conscience of Mexican journalism by providing something other newspapers do not: independent reporting combined with a broad commitment to social justice, as well as commentary by the country's best minds. Moreover, its presence on newsstands provides a psychological boost to activists, dissidents and students. If Mexico's beleaguered left, trapped in an authoritarian political system, has found a way to publish a daily newspaper, why can't we, with our greater resources and freedom?

The moment has arrived for such an undertaking. Most of us can agree that the *Times* and the *Post* have too much power, and that they are basically establishment-oriented publications of the center. Indeed, genuinely progressive voices and perspectives are absent from nearly every daily paper in the country. For every exception to this rule (Bob Herbert, Russell Baker, Juan Gonzalez, Molly Ivins) one finds scores of centrists and hard-core conservatives in the Op-Ed columns.

Still, a daily newspaper? Who in the left-liberal milieu can raise the sums needed to compete with corporate giants like Times Mirror, Gannett and The Washington Post Company? The obvious candidate is the newly invigorated A.F.L.-C.I.O., which in 1995 and 1996 spent \$35 million in an attempt to break the Republican hold on Congress. Labor overall gave another \$55 million in PAC donations and "soft money" party contributions. If unions were willing to spend that much money on a single election cycle, can they not invest similar sums in a project that would serve their needs just as well (if not better) than the expensive TV commercials it purchased last year? Think about it: The A.F.L.-C.I.O. has a built-in potential readership of 13 million members. If the federation agreed to get the paper into the hands of only 15 percent of that group, its circulation would be higher than *The Wall Street Journal's*. Even if it reached only 5 percent—650,000 people—that's more than enough to influence public opinion and put fear in the hearts of corporations.

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Organized labor, which has few friends in the media, could benefit from such an arrangement. After all, it must recruit at least 300,000 new members a year in order to maintain its current share of the work force—no easy task in a culture where unions are denigrated or ignored. That labor's perspective is absent from TV chat shows, talk-radio and Op-Ed pages is bad enough, but the labor beat itself has largely vanished from our newspapers. In this climate, it is unlikely that *The Washington Post* or ABC News will embrace the issues crucial to labor's future, such as labor-law reform and anti-scab legislation. The new leadership recognizes the need to level the media playing field; last fall it replaced the tepid *A.F.L.-C.I.O. News* with the glossy monthly *America@work*. But the latter, which has a circulation of 55,000, is aimed at union activists and opinion makers, and will have only marginal impact on the public. The need remains for a mass-circulation publication that takes organized labor and its members—and all working Americans—seriously.

Who else might be willing to fund such a newspaper? Liberals and the left lack a Murdoch to pay our bills, but if George Soros is willing to spend \$90 million on causes like immigrants' rights, drug policy reform and inner-city education, there ought to be someone out there willing to invest an equivalent sum in an ambitious journalistic enterprise. In the 1940s, Marshall Field III used his fortune to launch the leftist New York daily *PM*. In a nation with countless multimillionaires, isn't there at least one who will step forward and, in the spirit that inspired Field, help create an alternative to *USA Today*? Such a paper would have much going for it: a national readership, which would appeal to national advertisers, and a group of politically committed individuals who could distribute it in a highly aggressive way. (The Kansas-based socialist weekly *Appeal to Reason*, which had a paid circulation of more than 760,000 in 1913, relied on a nationwide army of tens of thousands of supporters who sold subscriptions and hawked copies in taverns, factories and union halls.) Once they develop a market niche, newspapers tend to be profitable, which means that this one could be around for a long time.

Ideally, a progressive daily would resurrect the spirit of an earlier era in American journalism, the period 1902-1912, when Upton Sinclair, Frank Norris, Ray Stannard Baker, Charles Edward Russell and Ida Tarbell, writing in places such as *McClure's* and *Collier's*, explored the underside of American capitalism

with trenchant critiques of political corruption, trusts and the exploitation of workers. What united these writers, Harvey Swados noted, was an "outraged identification with the friendless and the voiceless at the bottom of society" and a shared concern for the "moral progress" of their country. Today, for the vertically integrated corporations that own America's newspapers, quarterly profits are the journalistic beacon.

So it's hardly surprising that the press has ceased to be a corporate watchdog. In October, when Archer Daniels Midland agreed to pay a \$100 million fine for conspiring to fix prices, the story was little more than a blip on the media radar screen; *Time* buried it on page 64. A progressive newspaper could have given A.D.M. the drubbing it deserves. But the power to unearth corporate criminality would be just one weapon in the paper's arsenal; a valuable contribution can be made simply by asking salient questions: Why have wages for nonsupervisory employees tumbled 11 percent since 1978 while corporate profits jumped 205 percent? Why does the top 1 percent of the population own 39 percent of the nation's wealth, compared with 18 percent in Britain and 16 percent in Sweden? Why do stock prices rise when layoffs are announced? Why have U.S. corporations invested \$612 billion in low-wage areas around the world?

Strikes, boycotts, "living wage" campaigns, C.E.O. salaries, unionbusting tactics, sweatshops, workplace safety and parental leave are just a few of the subjects that would receive coverage as news, but there are countless others. Since the paper's success would depend on the degree to which it can provide information and analysis not found elsewhere, why not do a series describing how an American worker is killed, injured or poisoned on the job every five seconds? Or a fair comparison of the health care systems in the United States, Canada and Germany? Or a report on the battle to organize nursing home employees, poultry processors and farm workers? Or a careful look at the conditions in the *maquiladoras*? Or a series showing how, by and large, U.S. workers put in longer hours, with less vacation time, than our European counterparts?

And that's only the news columns. The editorial pages could do for us what *The Wall Street Journal* does for U.S. elites—function as a laboratory for new ideas, a factory for razor-sharp polemics and a proving ground for young writers. Just imagine if our side had a mass forum for the likes of Robert Kuttner, Ralph Nader, Barbara Ehrenreich, Juan Gonzalez, Barbara Reynolds, Jim Hightower, Maxine Waters, Paul Wellstone, Katha Pollitt, Molly Ivins and Cornel West, as well as newer voices. In contrast to the cautious language of the unsigned editorials in the *Times* and the *Post*, this paper could speak in a tone of justified outrage, a tone that encourages political engagement instead of cynicism and powerlessness.

Some people will want to know how the United States could support a progressive daily when it couldn't sustain a sports daily. *The National* folded in 1991 after losing tens of millions of dollars. That's a question that warrants further study, but one reason for its demise was that it couldn't compete with the high-quality sports coverage in *USA Today*. Others will inquire why founding a newspaper—as opposed to radio, TV or the Internet—should be the main effort. One reason is that the *Times*, *Post* and *Journal* form the intellectual backbone of the

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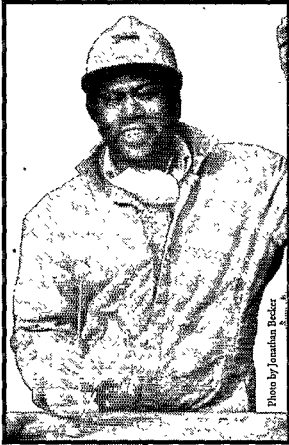
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print media industry, and electronic media rely heavily on them. The multiplier effect provides these newspapers with worldwide power and influence far beyond their circulation figures. In any case, online conversion would be relatively easy, giving the paper a presence in cyberspace.

As for the financial needs, newspaper analyst John Morton estimates it would cost at least \$300 million to establish a new national daily. But there may be ways to reduce that amount; a start-up regional edition in a single market is one example. Moreover, with regard to ownership structure, there are many possible models to follow. *La Jornada*, for instance, has 2,000 private shareholders, while South Korea's *Han Kyorae* was created from donations from 30,000 subscribers. In the United States, the *St. Petersburg Times* is owned by the nonprofit Poynter Institute for Media Studies.

Despite the numerous hurdles, this is a proposal that ought to be embraced by anyone who cares about social justice. Indeed, the audience for an opposition newspaper may well be out there. Colburn and Rogers remind us that at a time when our ideas have "receded to the point of vanishing as a practical political ideal," a mass base exists for progressive politics—perhaps a larger one than at any time since the thirties. If that's true, a newspaper that articulated the grievances of activists and intellectuals, workers and the unemployed, the excluded and the alienated, could play a role in the creation of a viable progressive coalition.

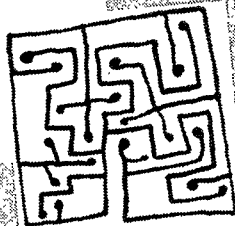
In order to succeed, the paper must be organized in a way that guarantees its political independence, which is the essential ingredient for public credibility and financial success. Here, of course, is where labor's possible involvement becomes problematic, since union newspapers are not known for their vitality, independence or accessibility. (An A.F.L.-C.I.O. house organ is the least desirable option.) Would labor fund a newspaper it can influence but not control? Lane Kirkland would have balked, but John Sweeney has already shown his willingness to break with the conservative traditions of his predecessors.

If the A.F.L.-C.I.O.'s new leadership is serious about rebuilding the labor movement, empowering its members, reaching out to other progressive constituencies and, as Sweeney wrote in his book, *America Needs a Raise*, "becom[ing] a kind of *Consumer Reports* for working families on legislative issues," then a collaborative journalistic arrangement like this is a way to demonstrate that commitment. Obviously, a newspaper that took labor seriously and incorporated its perspective on a daily basis would provide a tremendous boost to Sweeney's ambitious new recruitment strategy. Labor can't organize in an ideological vacuum; it must find a way to alter the consciousness of the general public. It's certainly hard to imagine the mainstream media—especially TV—showing more than a perfunctory interest in the federation's latest organizing drive, which includes strawberry workers in California and hotel, construction and health care employees in Las Vegas.

What does labor have to lose? It has pumped millions into the Democratic Party, and the North American Free Trade Agreement was the payback. Today, the Clinton Administration holds the federation in such contempt that Sweeney's preferred candidate for Secretary of Labor, Harris Wofford, was rebuffed by the White House. Can labor afford such an undertaking? The

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A.F.L.-C.I.O. recently signed a lucrative deal with Household International, a finance company, to provide credit-card services for union members. This deal alone is expected to bring \$300 million in new revenues into the A.F.L.-C.I.O.'s coffers in the next five years.

In spite of its comparative weakness, organized labor has the moral authority and the financial resources to help offset the media conglomerates. George Seldes argued for a labor daily, and

in 1947 A.J. Liebling, disgusted by the media's right-wing bias, advocated the creation of union-backed newspapers modeled on the British Labor Party's *Daily Herald*, which, before its collapse, served as a counterweight to the conservative Beaverbrook publications. Fifty years later, unions and the progressive community are more than ever at the mercy of the media lords. "I cannot believe," Liebling affirmed, "that labor leaders are so stupid they will let the other side monopolize the press indefinitely." ■

RUBIN IS THE MOST POWERFUL TREASURY SECRETARY SINCE ALEXANDER HAMILTON.

# Robert Rubin, Reignmaker

DOUG IRELAND

"I don't know what I knew." That's what Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin brazenly claimed when *The New York Times* asked about the Democratic National Committee-organized White House fundraising coffee with Bill Clinton last May that brought together some of the nation's most powerful bankers and the trio in charge of supervising and regulating them: Rubin; his Under Secretary for Monetary Affairs, John Hawke; and Comptroller of the Currency Eugene Ludwig. With his non-denial denial, a classic of the genre, Rubin joined the ever-lengthening list of Clinton Administration officials who develop amnesia when caught violating Washington's admittedly low ethical standards.

Participating in this presidential caffeine fix were D.N.C. chairman Don Fowler and party finance chairman Marvin Rosen; the bankers wound up contributing more than \$330,000 to Clinton's re-election. To believe Rubin's claim that "I never thought of this meeting as political"—a statement that indicates that at some point he *did* know what he knew—requires one to accept either that Fowler and Rosen dosed their coffee with a magic creamer rendering them invisible; or that Rubin, who was trained as a lawyer, is a *grand naïf* who found nothing *louche* about having party fundraisers at a meeting between regulators and regulated.

But the naïve do not rise to the heights of power that Rubin has so agilely scaled. Rubin's determinant mastery over the budget gives him effective control of domestic policy; and with foreign policy subordinated to the imperatives of trade and commerce, there too Rubin's voice prevails. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that Clinton is the President for school uniforms, the V-chip and mammograms, and Rubin is the President for everything else.

There is a view put about by Administration familiars in the Washington press corps that Rubin is some kind of liberal—as John Judis put it in a recent flattering *New Republic* profile, a "New Deal Republican" who was a "political neophyte" until he



STEVEN BROWER

joined Clinton's government. Neither statement matches reality.

Rubin has been mixing money and politics for years, as a key fundraiser and adviser to the presidential campaigns of Walter Mondale in 1984 and Michael Dukakis in 1988, and as chairman of the host committee for the Democrats' New York City convention in 1992—the same year that he raised big bucks for Clinton and thus became one of the most influential counselors of the Arkansas Governor's campaign.

"Rubin has been building toward his current hegemony ever since he got close to Mondale in '84," says William Greider, the author and *Rolling Stone* national editor. "It's the culmination of a ten-year campaign by Wall Street money guys who think they're statesmen to get control of the Democratic Party, which they did with Clinton."

As to Rubin's allegedly liberal side, his advice to Clinton in the first term was so unvaryingly conservative that the faux-populist political consultant James Carville—at the time sitting in on the important domestic policy meetings—took to calling him "Nick," after George Bush's Treasury Secretary Nicholas Brady. Rubin has supported the privatization of Social Security and Medicare. In the internal debate over what became Hillary Clinton's health care proposal, the alternative "Rubin plan" was a piece of bare-bones minimalism that would basically have covered only catastrophic illness—and thus have been a boon to the insurance companies (which coincidentally hold so much Wall Street paper). He has spearheaded the effort to cook the numbers of the Consumer Price Index downward, adopting the recommendations of a commission stacked with conservatives and headed by George Bush's chief economic adviser; this hurts not only those on Social Security and welfare but also union workers whose contracts link wage increases to cost-of-living adjustments. And Rubin's was the deciding voice in the severing of human rights from U.S. China policy to the benefit of the multinationals (and to the detriment of the U.S. economy: China has now surpassed Japan as the nation with which we have the largest trade deficit). Rubin has always been a downsizing deficit hawk, and this year's budget proves it, with its Republican-scale cuts in so-called entitlement

*Doug Ireland has been a columnist for The Village Voice, The New York Observer, the Paris daily Libération and New York. His weekly "Clinton Watch" column is syndicated by the Minneapolis City Pages.*

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