Speech

It was around this time in 1993 that I asked the sports editor at the New York Post, Bob Decker about working for him. At the time I was writing a weekly labor column for the Post that went on vacation every summer and was covering City Hall year-round, and I had the feeling that if I moved into sports I wouldn’t have to worry anymore about writing three pieces in a day and seeing none of them get into the paper because sometime that afternoon John Gotti had burped or Donald Trump had farted.

Bob hadn’t gotten back to me by the time in late September that the Newspaper Guild called a strike at the Post because Rupert Murdoch wanted to make massive cuts in staff and wasn’t offering to pay more than 15 cents on the dollar of the severance money that would have been guaranteed if the previous long-term publisher, Peter Kalikow, hadn’t gone bankrupt.

The strike seemed like a futile gesture. Not long after I started at The Chief back in 1980, Victor Gotbaum summed up why a strike by interns and residents against the city hospital system had failed by saying, “If you want to go to war, you’d better have some tanks and planes.” We didn’t seem to have many of those at the Post, and so it seemed like the kind of situation where the best thing I could do was keep my head low and hope to come out the other end okay.

Except that once I got on the picket line that Monday evening, what struck me was the anger so many of my co-workers felt, especially the older ones who Rupert was about to chisel out of $100,000 or more that they should have gotten in severance. The funny thing about it was that six months earlier, when there was a staff insurrection against one of our publishers of the month, Abe Hirschfeld, much of the local journalism world had rallied to our cause; Abe Rosenthal had likened us to the Solidarity movement in Poland rising up against the government. This time, nobody stepped up to speak for us, which struck me as funny in a not-nice way. I never thought it took much guts to stand up to a joker like Abe Hirschfeld. In contrast, Rupert was serious business -- a ruthless kind of guy who was proud of the way he busted out the newspaper unions in England and seemed intent on putting an American notch in his belt with the Guild.

It was a small miracle when we got the drivers’ union to honor the picket line that night and the paper wasn’t delivered. The exuberant cheer from the picket line was still resonating as I took the train home to Brooklyn after midnight. I’d run into John Cassidy, the paper’s business editor, in the small diner next door to the Post earlier that evening and he’d said to me, not unkindly, “The labor column isn’t going to be resuming, mate,” so I knew where that stood when I got home and started writing an impressionistic piece about that night.

The next morning I took it over to New York Newsday, and got a call later that afternoon from the op-ed editor there asking whether I could give him something with an edgier point of view to it. I had thought the piece I gave him could work nicely and still leave me with a job to go back to, but what he was asking for would foreclose that option. But I thought if they fired me, I had a pretty good shot of being hired at either the Times or Newsday, and it wasn’t like Abe Rosenthal was going to speak up for us, so what the hell.

The next night, when Murdoch still had made no attempt to get the paper out and I knew the piece would be running the next morning in Newsday, I called my bureau chief at the Post, David Seifman, to give him a heads-up so he wouldn’t be awakened the next morning by an editor and be caught in the dark. Seif mused over why I would want to put myself in that spot, then lapsed back into character and told me, “Well, it’s gonna be in Newsday, and in the middle of the paper. Don’t mention it to anybody; maybe nobody’ll notice.”

When I got to the picket line the following morning, someone had turned the piece into a flyer and handed it out to the strikers and anyone who passed by, so there went the chance that my blow against the empire would languish in obscurity, and that I would languish in the House of Rupert any longer. That night, the trucks rode right past the picket line, and the carnage that followed left hundreds of people without their jobs. That didn’t dismay me at all; I knew what I’d done. What did rock me into reality was that the piece immediately killed my chances of being hired by the Times – the metro editor who I had spoken to the morning after the strike began became permanently unreachable – and may have also hurt me at Newsday.

Henry Stern, the Parks Commissioner under both Ed Koch and Rudy Giuliani whose life was made miserable by DC 37 back when he worked in the agency during the Lindsay administration, once said my trouble was that I looked at unions in an idealized way, viewing them as the noble champions of working people rather than the grubby, clubby organizations that they acted like in the real world. I thought Henry was a pixieish, pixilated cynic when it came to labor, but I understood the roots of his conclusion; it was just that from the days when I worked the counter at Nathan’s Famous in Coney Island in the early 1970s while a high school and college student, I understood their value even with the imperfections that showed up.

When I began covering labor for The Chief 34 years ago, the municipal unions seemed like they came much closer to the ideal than private-sector unions like the Teamsters and the longshoreman’s union; if there was any corruption, I wasn’t hearing about it in the present tense. Gotbaum and Barry Feinstein and Al Shanker were still in their primes, and there were people lower on the totem pole like Al Viani and Charles Ensley and Bert Rose and Vinnie Bollon and Norman Adler and Beverly Gross who were willing to give you a fuller picture of the unions in all their color and made them breathe.

I came to the Post in 1989, when Dennis Rivera was just beginning to work his magic at Local 1199, one of a number of private-sector union leaders who was suddenly part of my beat. Some of the others were not nearly as admirable, and when I began writing the labor column in October 1990, after union concessions to Kalikow kept the Post afloat, I left some parts of the labor movement feeling they’d gotten a bit more than they bargained for from a column they seemed to think was designed mainly to propagandize for them. About a year later, I got called into the office of Rick Nasti, the general manager of the Post, for a sitdown with a representative of the Central Labor Council and the head of the Allied Printing Trades Council where the CLC guy aired a list of grievances about columns I had written. Why would I make a big deal about Gus Bevona being a low-key head of Local 32BJ? Why was I using a visit from George Bush the Elder’s Secretary of Labor to an apprenticeship program run by the carpenters union to write a column noting that the union’s head, Paschal McGuinness, was under Federal investigation and had been overheard saying to someone that he was okay with John Gotti? And why had I felt compelled to lampoon the head of the correction officers union, Phil Seelig, by noting that his nickname among his largely black membership was Elvis and that he had this cute habit of delaying contract settlements so that payment of retroactive raises would be made to his members just a few days before they got mail ballots for the latest union election?

The choices for their complaints seemed strange to me. Bevona was living like a pasha in the penthouse of the union’s headquarters while paying himself a huge salary, and had hired private detectives to spy on a union dissident named Carlos Guzman, scaring him mightily because he thought Bevona, who was said to have monthly lunch dates in Little Italy with John Gotti, was looking to have him killed. The carpenters union leader’s nickname among his own people was Pascal the Rascal, and Selig’s closest union associate upon dropping dead suddenly later that decade was reported to have $2 million stashed in a safe-deposit box. As I debated each column with the CLC guy, it became clear to me that what really had him exercised was that I had recently written a column in which I criticized CLC President Tom Van Arsdale for doing so little to help striking Daily News workers, and then retaliating against Dennis Rivera for doing so much on their behalf that Van Arsdale looked bad by comparison. That column didn’t stop there; its primary focus was a strike at the Rainbow Room inside NBC’s headquarters and the pain the restaurant workers felt that while they walked the picket line, electricians who came out of Van Arsdale’s Local 3 every day not only crossed their picket line but laughed when the workers appealed to them not to do so. Van Arsdale’s response when I interviewed him about it was to say that this was unfortunate, but that it would be even worse if the electricians honored the picket line and were replaced by non-union labor.

A half-dozen years later, when I did a piece for the New York Observer on the more-energetic man who succeeded Van Arsdale, Brian McLaughlin, I used a quote from DC 37’s longtime lobbyist, Norman Adler, stating that Tom Van Arsdale was no more suited to leading the city labor movement than he was to be a runway model in the garment district. I didn’t have anything quite that clever to use in my discussion with the CLC guy in Rick Nasti’s office that day, but I got under his skin enough that he finally declared that the main trouble with me was that I just didn’t like unions.

All I could say in response was that this wasn’t true, and that if anything, I liked the unions and the people they represented a lot more than some of the labor leaders I’d criticized. So everybody did their venting and nothing was really resolved, aside from getting some insight into how much I infuriated some powerful people in the labor movement. A few months after that, when Paschal McGuinness was forced out of office at the carpenters union under a Justice Department consent decree, he was succeeded by Fred Devine. Paschal was connected to the Gambino Crime Family; Devine was a wholly owned subsidiary of the Genovese Family, and even after one of my editors toned down my lead sentence about the transition, I got the head of the Post copy desk to include the word “Woodfellas” in the headline. I’m sure the CLC leadership of that era was not amused, but I never quite understood how it felt comfortable doing business with mobbed-up union leaders yet shunned Dennis Rivera for actually living up to the ideals we like to associate with unions at their best.

But then, I guess I’d gotten a partial answer back in June 1980, a couple of weeks before I gave up a temporary job as a bike messenger to come to work for the Chief, when the old seafarers union president Paul Hall died. Hall wasn’t very polished; he was a big beefy guy from Alabama who never lost the drawl, from what I’ve been told, and yet everyone I’ve spoken to who knew him described him as a kind of secular saint of labor. According to Bert Rose, back in the 1950s, Hall responded to strikebreaking efforts at a company near the docks by arranging for the marquee name among its hired guns, the fearsome Albert Anastasia,to be grabbed off the street, thrown into a big dark car, and then deposited back at the site 10 or 15 minutes later after getting the kind of thorough beating he specialized in delivering. The company’s owners settled the strike the next day, Bert said.

I first learned about Paul Hall in the obituary Murray Kempton wrote in his column for the Post. If memory serves, he began it with an anecdote about his own beginnings at the paper as a labor reporter in the days when the Post was owned by Dorothy Schiff and it wasn’t obligatory to refer to “union bosses and union goons.” Murray noted that his first Christmas as a labor reporter was marked by the delivery of 150 bottles of Scotch from the unions he covered. The second Christmas, after he’d had a couple of races over the track and began to describe what was there to be seen by a perceptive journalist, he wrote that his holiday Scotch gifts dwindled down to just two bottles. Both of them, Kempton wrote, came from Paul Hall.

Murray moved on to much-larger canvases than the one offered by labor, but he brought the same remarkable sensibility and understanding of the complexity of the union movement to everything he covered, and occasionally returned to its travails. I remember covering the labor-racketeering trial of Anthony Scotto in 1979 and, after the closing summations to the jury from both sides, Murray walked into the press room in the Foley Square courthouse and declared, “Well, I hope to God justice doesn’t prevail.” He knew Scotto was guilty as charged; what he also realized, though, was that he was a fairer, more-enlightened union leader than whoever would take his place.

It is a gift to spend time around someone who can keep two such opposing notions fixed in his head without losing his bearings. I suppose my own interest in such complexities is what has led to my spending so much of my career covering labor; that and that no one seemed to want to hire me to write sports for them.

There’s a collection of my columns that came out as a book at the beginning of this year. It’s rough on some unions and some union leaders, although it’s complimentary of quite a few others and contains a fair amount of compassion for some of the labor people who screwed up royally. I’d accent the word “fair” -- those who didn’t deserve it weren’t as fortunate.

The book’s called “Enough Blame to Go Around,” and focuses on the struggles of public-employee unions and the degree to which their problems are self-inflicted and how much they are the result of outside forces, some of them clearly malevolent. I understand why it can be controversial among some union leaders; hard truths can be unpleasant reading material.

I also wonder about people sometimes being oversensitive. There’s a column that didn’t make it into the book, written just about a year ago, dealing with the aftermath of the school-bus strike caused by Mayor Bloomberg’s decision to take away longtime job and benefit protections on a flimsy pretense. The day it appeared, I got a call from a prominent labor leader complaining that I had used a quote from an anonymous union official saying there hadn’t been more support for the striking union because of its past history of being “mobbed up.” He asked why I had to use the quote; I told him because it offered insight into why there hadn’t been more of a labor response to what Bloomberg had done, essentially taking a broad leap toward busting a union. He still wasn’t thrilled by my explanation, and when I got off the phone, I opened the paper to the column to see whether that single quote might really skew public perception of the situation.

I got as far as looking at the headline I had slapped on the piece: “Mikey Billions Meaner Than Matty the Horse.” The implication was that our billionaire Mayor had allowed greater exploitation of a group of not-terribly well-paid workers than was ever engaged in when the late Genovese Crime Family boss Matthew Ianniello controlled the union. I closed the paper, a bit stunned that speaking of Bloomberg in that light hadn’t made a stronger impression on this labor leader than the comment about the “mobbed-up union” that in his mind represented a regrettable rehashing of the union’s recent past.

I’d like to think that this award you’re giving me today is at least partly an acknowledgement that people here understand why I write what I write, with as much honesty and thought as I can muster. If any of your bosses might be inclined to take it the wrong way, all I can tell you is to paraphrase what my bureau chief at the Post told me 21 years ago: don’t mention it to them. Maybe they won’t notice.