

Labor TV in Chicago: A Brief History

Marking the 30th Anniversary of the Founding of Labor Beat

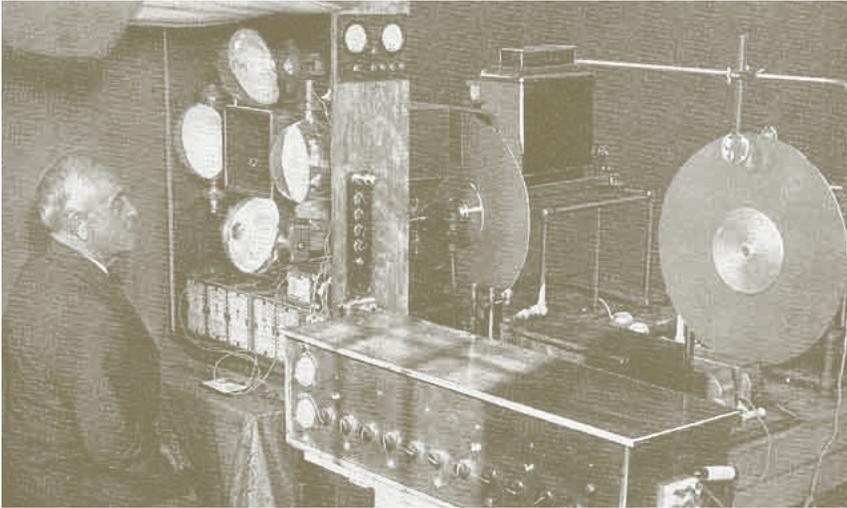


Photo: WCFL Radio Magazine

Secretary of Chicago Federation of Labor E. N. Nockels starred in history's first labor TV show.

Amelia Earhart was in the middle of her first trans-Atlantic flight. Mickey Mouse appeared in his first cartoon the previous month. And in Chicago on June 19, 1928 history's first labor television show went on the air. Yet in two weeks — like in a science fiction time-travel mystery — the experiment ended, and memory of it almost disappeared from history.

Thanks however to the Chicago Federation of Labor's newspaper *Federation News*, this amazing moment was at least documented.

Decades later Nathan Godfried, in his book on labor radio *WCFL, Chicago's Voice of Labor, 1926-78* mentions this bold, early experiment in labor TV in a footnote. Intrigued, Labor Beat got some microfilm copies of *Federation News*, and then explored the archives of the Early Television Museum in Hilliard, OH. As a result, we were able to fill in some background to the 1928 event.

CFL's creative thinkers

There are at least two key personalities which made possible this early labor television adventure: one was the President of the CFL, John Fitzpatrick, who encouraged new ideas, including setting up the CFL's own radio station (WCFL). WCFL was a revolutionary step in the American labor movement, and it met with resistance from the conservative AFL nationally. The new labor radio station also became a milieu in which its chief engineer Virgil Schoenberg — today he'd be called a nerd — hatched his 'mad' plan. History's first labor tv show was transmitted

from Navy Pier's North Tower and a television receiver was set up at Electricians Hall at 47 N. Ogden Ave. After the initial successes (there were several broadcasts in June of that year) Schoenberg decided to write some articles in the *Federation News* encouraging readers, some of whom could actually understand the instructions, to build their own receiver sets. Here's a sample:

"The detector feeds into several stages of good resistance coupled amplification. Here again great pains should be taken in the selection of coupling

condenser resistances, and tubes should be given consideration. It is advisable that the last stage employ a power tube either of the 210 or 250 type."

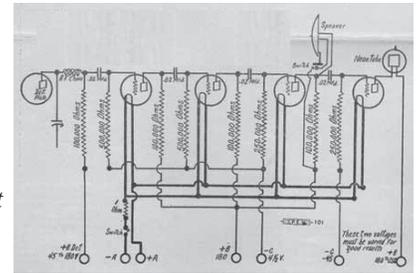


Photo: Chicago Federation of Labor

And labor videographers today complain about figuring out .mpg4 settings for YouTube! In any event, Schoenberg was, alas, too ahead of his time with his dreams for labor tv in the late 1920s. However, labor programming continued on WCFL into the 1950s, and made its own contribution to labor media history — another story for another time.



Photo: WCFL Radio Magazine

Station W9XAA. Virgil Schoenberg (Right, wearing glasses) was radio station WCFL's chief engineer and wrote technical articles in the CFL's newspaper telling workers how to construct a tv receiver.

1983 and the coming of cable-tv

In the early 1980s Chicago's modern era of labor television dawned with cable tv. This introduced a variety of players onto the scene: the Chicago Federation of Labor, the AFL-CIO, rank-and-file video activists and media reform advocates.

The AFL-CIO and rank-and-file labor video types (unusual bedfellows) tried to convince the Chicago Federation of Labor to see the coming of public access channels as a way to start producing pro-union TV shows.

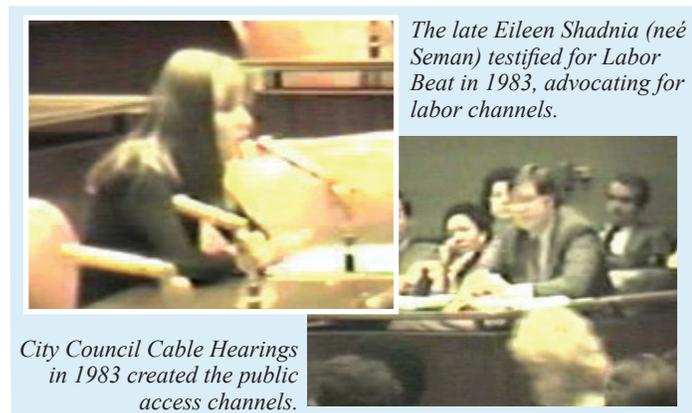
At this time the AFL-CIO had begun a national critique of mainstream media's (including PBS) bias against labor. It created the Labor Institute for Public Affairs to urge union affiliates to use tv and other new technologies to get their message out to the general public. LIPA sent a representative to Chicago in 1983 to encourage the CFL to start producing its own shows on the planned public access channels. But the CFL, since it had sold WCFL in 1978 (then a music station) because they saw it as a money pit, were by that time convinced that making tv shows would be too costly. Their main interest at the hearings was to make sure that the city used union labor when the cable infrastructure was built.



LIPA, a creation of AFL-CIO in 80s.

Another player at the hearings (far smaller in influence) was a grouping of community and labor media activists who collected around the Citizens Committee on the Media.

In this orbit, the Committee for Labor Access formed. CLA became the producer of the Labor Beat tv show. We, Labor Beat, tried to convince the CFL that public access was actually a very inexpensive way of producing tv. But the CFL was never swayed by this argument.



The late Eileen Shadnia (néé Seman) testified for Labor Beat in 1983, advocating for labor channels.

City Council Cable Hearings in 1983 created the public access channels.

Labor Beat also strongly advocated at the City Council hearings that access for labor-oriented programming must be assured. Language providing for public access channels and

their funding was ultimately approved. And in 1986, when the public access channels finally went online, Labor Beat was one of the very first scheduled shows. But it was around the 1983 City Council hearings that Labor Beat was born and through which its mission emerged. Labor Beat at that time would have to carry alone the banner for labor television in Chicago, and figure out how to keep going.

Our basic approach to producing shows emerged in those early years. To maintain our scheduled slot on CAN TV Channel 19 (9:30 pm Thurs., 4:30 pm Fri.), we had to produce two new shows a month. Having two deadlines a month was and still is intimidating. However, over the years we have come to see that our greatest asset was in fact the twice-monthly deadline. Without it, we don't think the large body of our work (over 670 shows as of this writing) would have ever come into existence.

And early on we decided that our shows would be crafted in the editing suite, using a lot of location footage of labor struggles combined with interviews. Soon the magazine format prevailed, with two or more segments per show, as we phased out the in-studio talking heads approach.

We also realized that, because a rank-and-file group was the producer, our operational costs would have to be very low. Getting grants became more and more of a problem for two basic reasons: they are almost inevitably traced back to liberal corporations whose political outlook would eventually exert pressure on what we did; and foundations usually said: "we don't fund union-oriented projects...why don't you just ask the unions for the money?"

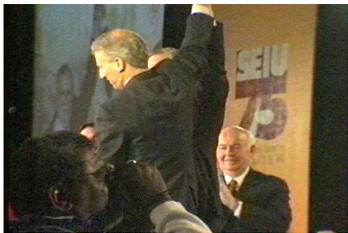
The labor news environment we plunged into in the late 80s is evident in the show titles: "Unfair Skies: Icahn, TWA, and Unionbusting", "Chicago-Gary Homeless Union", "Vietnam Veterans Against the War 20th Anniversary", "Illinois Labor Network Against Apartheid", "Report from Kilosang Mayo Uno" (Philippines), "Debbie Fights Back" (Hotel workers organize Nikko Hotel), "La Mode and Other Stories" (ILGWU); "Labor Notes Conference 1989".

In this way, we began to accumulate what is now a very large (probably unrivaled) body of archival videos specifically focused on working class struggle from 1986 to the present (2013). It was also in this work that we began to gain experiences not only in covering single events at one location, but in handling the complex problems of producing timely video journalism covering multi-faceted events spread over wide geographical areas. That laid the basis for major campaigns later, such as the Illinois War Zone and the fight to defend public education in Chicago.

Watershed of the 1990s

The first early exercise in the ‘wide theater of battle’ school of labor tv journalism was “Big CAT [Caterpillar] Fight” in 1992. Labor Beat sent camera crews to Peoria, and incorporated footage from UAW 974 videographers downstate as well as those traveling with solidarity caravans from Michigan. This prepared us for the much bigger War Zone (Decatur) strategic theater in the mid 90s, where our coverage expanded far beyond this town in central Illinois. Labor Beat ended up producing over 10 shows about this key event in labor history, using rank-and-file footage from Decatur, Peoria, Canada, Bal Harbor (FL), Chicago and New York City.

Related to this major story was another: the resignation of AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland (precipitated by the War Zone uprising) and the struggle over who would replace him. Labor Beat generated an inter-related set of shows revolving around the historic AFL-CIO shakeup.



1996: Andy Stern (C) becomes new SEIU Pres., as outgoing Sweeney (R) becomes new AFL-CIO head

For example, Sweeney’s election to AFL-CIO leadership led the way to Andy Stern becoming SEIU International President in 1996 (“SEIU, the Search for the Future”). This was just one after effect of the War Zone blowup, detailed in some 15

Labor Beat shows, a priceless video resource for labor history on the 90s.

2000s: privatizations, wars, and YouTube

Throughout each decade hundreds of stories are covered, from healthcare, labor history and culture, newspaper strikes, textile workers, immigration, Teamsters, SAG-AFTRA, WTO Seattle, the list is almost endless.

Again, like the previous decade, certain protracted battles are covered in a whole series of shows, providing especially expanded coverage in two areas: Labor’s emerging opposition to the endless wars, and the crucial fight against privatization of the public sector, particularly education.

In the midst of this, Labor Beat continued its activism on the general problem of the anti-labor bias of the mainstream media. Although unions through press conference and visually-oriented protests can at times get out some messages (muffled and distorted), network news is not a faithful weapon. Mainstream media, through its ownership and political connections, has a particular animus against labor.

When the Sweeney leadership took over the AFL-CIO in the mid-90s, it shut down the Labor Institute of Public Affairs, ending early steps toward big budget national labor tv.

But Chicago-area unions had become increasingly aware of the need to do something. In 2003, a Labor Media Conference was held, organized by Labor Beat, Chicago Labor Education Program - Univ. of Illinois, and Chicago Access Network Television/CAN TV. Sponsors included Chicago Federation of Labor, AFSCME Council 31, Chicago Teachers Union, SEIU 73, Illinois AFL-CIO, HERE Local 1, Teamsters Local 705, Rockford United Labor, and others.



Panelists at 2003 Conference: (L-R) Fred Glass, John Anderson, Kari Lyderson, and Bob Bruno. Keynote speaker was Margaret Blackshere (inset), then President of Illinois AFL-CIO



The conference addressed the need for a more potent communication strategy for labor, and to discuss new technologies available to working people.

Although it is difficult to assess whether the conference had a direct effect on such developments, through the rest of the 2000s we can see a gradual growth of Chicago area unions’ utilizing Internet strategies and the public access channels.

By the end of the decade, CAN TV’s Community Partners series reported 17 labor-oriented episodes. By 2012, some 28 shows were aired, featuring Chicago Teachers Union, CFL, Illinois Labor History Society, National Nurses United, Chicago Jobs with Justice, Stand Up! Chicago, to mention only a few. In

addition to this series, there are today two regularly scheduled union-oriented shows. One is Labor Beat, and the other is SEIU 73, a live call-in show. (In 1996 SEIU 46 produced a call-in series called SEIU Says, created by a Labor Beat member who at the time was a Local 46 staffer.)

The other major development for labor-oriented video since 2000 has been the Internet (YouTube, Vimeo, etc., and live streaming). These technical tools were never imagined by the WCFL in 1928. Their model was a labor radio and tv station functioning as a large budget, high maintenance national hub.



The number of union locals and members who have in the last few years used YouTube and live streaming is now beyond calculation. Some forward-thinking locals, such as the Chicago Teachers Union, has employed a combination of a Web site linked with YouTube clips produced by their members, including edited mini-documentaries by volunteers and professionals.

Internet and cable-tv

Labor Beat since the 80s developed along two tracks. One was to keep abreast of the new technologies such as the Internet, and the other is to preserve and improve our documentary style as a television show. Throughout all this, we have preserved and cataloged our work, creating a huge archive of historic, edited documents as well as of raw footage. We live in both the YouTube world, and the cable-tv world.

Certainly the quick, basically little or un-edited 5 minute YouTube spot reports from picket lines and protests play an important role in the class struggle. But there is also an essential place for longer, technically edited, more in-depth analyses (mini-documentary) bringing together background information and images.

We see YouTube and cable-tv as two different, related genres. YouTube (let's use the term "video") is generally appreciated on a small screen and excels as 'breaking news'. Cable-tv (let's use the term "television") is appreciated on a much larger screen, often encountered while the viewer is surfing polished, highly edited network news or news magazine formats. It finds its strength in analysis and investigation. Cable-tv also reaches the passive channel surfer in Chicago's 500,000 cable-tv homes (and homes in our other 6 cities), people who may not otherwise be exposed to pro-labor ideas.

While traditional public access cable-tv talking heads shows do inform the public, the more labor-intensive, edited style, taking the viewer outside the studio, onto locations and into the dramatic action, must be nurtured.



CTU President Lewis surrounded by tv cameras in 2012 strike

The difference between breaking news and magazine format becomes obvious when we consider our decades-long (30 shows since 1994) documenting of the battle against privatization of public education.

"What... [the] Labor Beat crew have actually done is monumental: they have effectively provided a running narrative, a movie documentary of the corporate school reform and labor resistance to it in Chicago."

—Prof. Todd Alan Price, *Defending Public Education from Corporate Takeover*

Amid many other topics, we have also created a special record, without its equal, on the development of an anti-war movement in labor, and the AFL-CIO's 2005 resolution against the Iraq War. (Five videos on US Labor Against the War, and many shows on Chicago anti-war movement, including anti-NATO protests.)

Other clusters of shows have been on the Madison 'commune' of 2010 (eight videos), and, more recently, the new unionization movement in minimum-wage private sector (four shows since Nov. 2012). Also the historic 2006 May Day immigrant rights march, as well as many other May Day's.

To our knowledge, we are today the only labor cable-tv series of its kind in the U.S. Chicago, with public access CAN TV, has provided a rare opportunity for regularly scheduled labor *television* that challenges network news on its own original turf. We don't claim any victory, other than to have held our ground and shown that regularly scheduled labor television is possible. We hope that you, and your union organization if you belong to one, will support us with a generous donation. Our body of work chronicles three decades of an undefeated working class, vast in its creativity, whose deeper layers are only now awakening. It ought to be televised.



U.S. Labor Against the War founding conference, Jan. 2003



Madison – we were there, and we assess the aftermath.



Tory Moore, Warehouse Workers for Justice, at a 2013 conference

Chicago CAN TV Ch 19 – 9:30p Thurs • 4:30p Fri
 Evanston ECTV Ch 6 – 5:30p Mon • 7p Wed • 12:30a Sat
 Rockford Cable Ch 17 – 8:30p Tues
 Champaign, IL; Philadelphia, PA; Rochester, NY; Princeton, NJ

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 (Committee for Labor Access)



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