

The growing silence of 'union radio'

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The golden age of unions is long gone — and for the radio shows that focus on labor and workers rights, every day is a struggle just to stay on the airwaves.

There are a number of talk radio shows around the country covering — and funded by — organized labor that are still up and running, but like the labor movement as a whole, what remains is a far cry from the time when unions and the concerns of workers were a dominant part of the media landscape.

“It’s literally dying on the vine,” said former radio host-turned-Democratic candidate for the Michigan House of Representatives Tony Trupiano. “The future does not look good for labor radio or progressive radio in any way, shape or form.”

People behind the shows with whom POLITICO spoke recently said their programs were in part sponsored or financially supported by advertising with union money. Individual donors also contribute to keep the shows — which broadcast from Pittsburgh, Madison, Wis., and Washington, among other cities — on air.

The niche has suffered some hard hits lately, with local programs in Michigan and Wisconsin going dark at the end of 2013. The dozen or so shows that still offer up labor and union concerns to radio listeners are mostly local, based in the country’s traditional union strongholds of Wisconsin and Pennsylvania. There’s just one nationally syndicated labor program in the country — “The Union Edge” — and it counts about 15 stations to its name.

The hosts and several radio observers say the programs are a bulwark against what they call the corporatization of the airwaves, and they argue that without the shows, labor issues such as raising the federal minimum wage and fighting right-to-work legislation would disappear altogether from radio.

“The issues of working Americans, whether they’re union members or not, are barely covered by the media in this country today,” said radio consultant Peter B. Collins, who hosts a liberal podcast. “And I don’t think that it’s an accident.”

At least 100 locally produced programs were on the air in the 1950s, during the heyday of unions, according to Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, a history professor at West Virginia University. In 1950, the AFL went live five nights a week over 176 radio stations, and, starting in 1953, the CIO show was broadcast on more than 150 network stations, she noted.

There were 16 labor radio programs during that era in Michigan alone, compared with about the same number across the whole country today.

“Labor’s voice was heard by the American public in ways that it’s absolutely not today,” said Fones-Wolf, who wrote about the labor movement’s history with radio in her book, “Waves of Opposition: Labor and the Struggle for Democratic Radio, 1933-58.”

For an explanation, look at what’s happened to the audience: In 1953, unions boasted 17.7 million members, or 32 percent of the workforce, while in 2012, union membership had dwindled to 14.5 million, or just 11.3 percent of the workforce.

Today, most shows are helmed by people with union connections but are not run by the unions themselves. The American Federation of Government Employees is an exception, with a weekly program, “Inside Government,” airing every Friday on D.C.’s Federal News Radio.

“We feel like it’s almost one of a kind because we have access to all of these great workers who are our members and they’re able to tell their stories every week,” host and producer Jason Forincola said.

At the end of 2013, two talk shows in the genre — the Detroit-based “Night Shift with Tony Trupiano” and Madison’s “The People’s Mic with Doug Cunningham” — went off the air. Trupiano ended his show to run for the Michigan State House, while Cunningham’s program bit the dust after two years due to financial problems.

Cunningham, who still hosts WIN, a daily, three-minute newscast out of Madison focused on labor news, noted that the small organization also had to lay off a news producer at the end of last year due to the financial crunch. “We had a crisis at the end of last year, a cash flow crisis where we were in danger of having to pull the plug on the news service entirely,” Cunningham said, adding that WIN was able to raise close to \$90,000 to keep the labor newscast on the air.

“Our main mission, really, when it comes right down to it, is to provide the coverage of workers and their movement that’s largely missing or filtered through such a corporate prism that it gets distorted by the mass media,” he said of the WIN show, which can be heard during breaks for progressive talker Thom Hartmann’s program as well as on about 70 other radio feeds around the country.

Rick Smith, who hosts his self-titled radio show out of Carlisle, Pa., said he is supported “mainly by a number of labor friends, across the spectrum. Virtually all of the unions give me a little bit of something — couple hundred bucks here, couple hundred bucks there; we’re not talking huge amounts of money.”

Smith, a truck driver and teamster for nearly 20 years before he started his show in 2005, said he is always upfront about his union support. “I’ll tell you exactly where my money comes from — it comes from organized labor,” he said.

“The only people who are going to invest in a program like mine are the people who see my message as something they believe in. Corporate America? Not so much,” he said. “When you’re talking about, ‘Hey, I think your workers should be organized and sharing some of your profits,’ how many companies are going to go, ‘Oh yeah, let’s jump right on that ship?’”

And Smith said his show, which is on several stations in central Pennsylvania and online, has one major goal: “To provide an alternative to the massive control that the corporate media has over working people” by countering the “mainstream message that unions are bad.”

Across the airwaves for those in the labor media world, the 2011 Wisconsin protests still maintain a strong hold. Cunningham’s program “The People’s Mic” was triggered by the occupation of the state capitol, although Frank Emspak, the CEO of Diversified Media Enterprises and producer of WIN and “The People’s Mic,” noted that the enthusiasm behind the protests, which failed to recall Gov. Scott Walker, didn’t translate to financial support for the talk radio program.

“We felt that when we started, because it was going to be a political year, that there would be a great interest in advertising on the progressive network,” Emspak said. “But we ... discovered that none of the candidates on the left wanted to advertise there because they figured they already had those votes.”

Smith, meanwhile, said he now sees the issues that were at the heart of the labor uprising in Wisconsin making

their way across the country to his state and predicts that the “dominance of the corporate class” could snowball if Pennsylvania “becomes the next Michigan” and is made a right-to-work state.

“Maybe that’s what needs to happen,” he said. “Maybe things need to get so much worse. Maybe we need to go back to those depression-era events where the country is literally being torn apart and the Koch brothers and their ilk are afraid of their heads on platters before things change.”

Another labor radio show based in Pennsylvania, “The Union Edge,” which has the tagline “Labor’s Talk Radio,” has been on the air for seven years and touts podcast downloads of up to 10,000 a month. Hosted by Charles Showalter, the former president of the National Homeland Security Council, the program is not “necessarily progressive, although we do talk a lot about progressive issues,” he said.

“We’re labor. That’s our premise — we come from labor first, and then we talk about those politicians who are willing to support working families, not just a carte blanche anybody on this side of the aisle or that side of the aisle,” he said.

The most frequent political guest on the show, which is self-syndicated on several stations from Washington, D.C., to Washington state, is former Rep. Mark Critz, currently running for Pennsylvania lieutenant governor, who called the program a key way to keep labor issues such as a living wage for working families in the media.

“With the anti-labor push at both the federal and state level, I feel very strongly that we need to stay on the airwaves talking about the difference unions have made in people’s lives,” said Critz, a Democrat who regularly comes on the show to co-host its “Congressional Insights” segment.

“I think part of the reason others are struggling is really just because everyone who isn’t a giant corporation is struggling,” said Angela Baughman, producer of “The Union Edge.” “All of the community radio stations seem to be having trouble, a lot of the progressive shows are even going off the air, it’s kind of that radio climate right now.”

Still, radio industry consultant Robert Unmacht sees a future — but perhaps not a widely successful one — for shows that zero in on labor.

“The economics of each one vary greatly from a labor of love to promotion for another cause to making money in its own right,” he said. “They have been around radio since the start and, I think, always will be.”

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