

8-15-2007

Review: Outside the Box: Corporate Media, Globalization, and the UPS Strike by Deepa Kumar

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Recommended Citation

Martin, Christopher R. (2007) "Review: Outside the Box: Corporate Media, Globalization, and the UPS Strike by Deepa Kumar," *Democratic Communiqué*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/democratic-communication/vol21/iss2/6>

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Outside the Box: Corporate Media, Globalization, and the UPS Strike by Deepa Kumar. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007, 237p (cloth)
ISBN10:0-252-03172-5; ISBN-13: 978-0-252-03172-4.

I write this just after the conclusion of August 2007, the month of the 10-year anniversary of Princess Diana's death. It was also the month of the 10-year anniversary of the Teamsters strike against UPS, one the largest and most successful labor strikes in decades.

The fact that only one of these anniversaries got a great deal of ink and airplay tells you all you need to know about the corporate media. Ten years after the car crash death of Diana, she is still a major topic in the news. The terms "Princess Diana and death" maxed out on a LexisNexis search, with 1000+ hits from the past month in both the Major U.S. and World Newspaper, and the TV and Broadcast

Radio Transcript databases. Meanwhile, the great victory of 185,000 Teamsters against UPS in 1997 has been erased from the media's memory. The search terms "UPS and strike and labor" netted exactly zero stories on the newspaper and broadcast databases.

Deepa Kumar, an assistant professor in the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at Rutgers University, would have predicted this. According to her account in *Outside the Box*, the news media coverage of the three-week UPS strike in 1997 was first framed unfavorably to workers, then turned surprisingly favorable in the second week, and finally turned back to unfavorable and disinterested by the third week. Apparently, mainstream news media interest in the UPS story hasn't recovered since that third week of the strike in August 1997.

The focus of the book is really what happened on that second week of favorably framed news coverage. How it was possible that such a thing could even happen in the corporate news media?

Kumar analyzed transcripts of 269 news reports (including morning, evening, late night, and weekend news programs) by the three major U.S. television networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) and 191 stories from three leading newspapers (the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *USA Today*). She provides rich context to her analysis, with deep research into the details of the UPS case, particularly the political and economic conditions that gave rise to the strike and the Teamsters' superb preparations for the strike.

There are some wonderful findings here, especially as Kumar answers the question "How Did the Teamsters Win" in Chapter 5, extending the earlier accounts of Matt Witt and Rand Wilson (both who worked on the Teamsters communications team during the strike).¹ The International Brotherhood of Teamsters, under the long shadow of Jimmy Hoffa, had not been known as a paragon of democracy. But, as Kumar notes, corruption and links to organized crime spurred the formation of an internal caucus, Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU). The reform-minded members of the TDU finally helped bring a progressive candidate, Ron Carey, to head the Teamsters in 1991. Carey fended off a close re-election challenge in 1996 from James P. Hoffa (Jimmy's son), representative of the entrenched old guard at the union. After that close victory, and with a UPS contract up for renewal in a year, "Carey recognized that that to succeed in the UPS contract negotiations he would have to go *around* the leadership of the old-guard locals and mobilize the rank and file," Kumar says.

Thus, a full year before the strike, Carey and the UPS leaders engaged in a contract campaign, communicating with locals, but going directly to workers when old guard local representatives threw up roadblocks. The Teamsters used surveys, newsletters, videos, and rallies to communicate with workers, and appointed ("for the first time in the union's history," Kumar notes) rank-and-file workers to the negotiating committee. When the Teamsters went on strike on August 4, the members were prepared to explain the issues of inequality to customers and the news media: full-time work at part-time status, a two-tier wage scale (lower for more recent hires), and a pension fund that UPS wanted to take over.

After the expected news frames about strike-caused inconveniences in the first week, something changed. By the second week, news media surveys indicated that

a majority of Americans supported the Teamsters in the strike. “The working class, which is barely conscious of its class identity because of an ideological environment dominated by corporations, recognized that the experiences of the workers were similar to their own,” Kumar writes. “By mobilizing class consciousness, the Teamsters won public opinion, which then influenced the tone of the strike coverage in several national news media outlets” and headed off political intervention.

Breaking through the news media’s narrative frames is difficult. One of the most pernicious frames is the powerful “nationalist” narrative. Kumar points out the terrible irony of such coverage: “While we are told, on the one hand, that nation-states no longer have the power to control MNCs [multi-national corporations] or to insist on labor and environmental standards, on the other, citizens are routinely asked to sacrifice for the “national interest.” This news media frame was in full force in the U.S. media as the rationale for Reaganomics in the 1980s. Kumar notes that “by 1987, in the midst of the Reagan boom, almost three-quarters of all contracts covering one thousand or more workers included concessions; for manufacturing workers, the figure was 90 percent.” So, workers (including UPS workers who agreed to contract concession of a two-tier wage system in the 1980s) make sacrifices for the national economy, while corporations work to lower their tax rates, export jobs to low-wage countries, and slacken health and safety standards to boost corporate profits. Ahh, it’s morning in America again.

Kumar recommends readers skip Chapter 6 (titled “Rethorizing Resistance in Communication and Media Studies”), unless they are interested in media theory. Still, despite the intimidating title, this chapter is a nice introduction to media theory concepts, as it clearly explains how resistant action like the UPS strike is interpreted from the standpoints of cultural studies, liberal pluralism, and political economy. Kumar critiques the first two views: “if postmodern cultural studies downplays the need for material transformation, liberalism sees no necessity for it. Liberalism’s position on media and democracy is based on an acceptance of the fundamental soundness of the current media system, despite all of its limitations.” She sides with the political economy camp, and endorses a more radical approach in which “the struggle to create a public sphere must be located within the larger struggle against the structures of oppression and exploitation.”

The book also includes an appendix, a wonderful historical record of the author’s 2004 interview with Ron Carey. After the 1997 strike victory, Carey was removed from the Teamsters over a finance scandal in his 1996 Teamster reelection campaign. The allegations against Carey seemed like payback from UPS and the old guard, Carey said. Carey was acquitted of all charges in 2001, but not before James Hoffa became president of the union in 1998. Carey remains a critical voice in the labor movement, embracing a global labor movement, and—what must be directed to today’s Teamster leadership—union democracy, “where members are free to stand up at meetings and speak their minds.”

Outside the Box is optimistic about the lessons of the UPS strike. Kumar concludes “the UPS strike showed what is possible in the context of growing class polarization and anger today.” But, Kumar continues, “what is necessary is a labor movement that can channel this anger and turn it into action.” Indeed, class polarization and anger still persist today. Yet, given the excellent case study lesson out-

lined by Kumar, what has the labor movement learned? To date, the Teamsters and other unions broke from the AFL-CIO (in 2005) to form the Change to Win federation, but one would be hard-press to find much change or many major wins since UPS.

In fact, the most successful labor action to penetrate the mainstream media in the U.S. since 1997—aside from the protests against the World Trade Organization at its 1999 meeting in Seattle—were the immigrant rallies in Spring 2006. Millions of immigrants across the country, mostly from Latin America, demonstrated for immigrant rights and helped to move the debate in their favor. But, organized labor's role in these protests was small and lacked a clear voice.

Kumar rightly observes the possibilities of a larger umbrella movement for social justice, noting, “the immigrant rights movement has the potential to revitalize the labor movement in the U.S.” But for the labor movement to prevail, she argues, it needs to link with a larger movement of progressives, refusing the limits of the corporate media and mainstream politics and pushing their own agenda into the public sphere.

Reference

Matt Witt and Rand Wilson, “Part-time America Won’t Work,” in *Not Your Father’s Union Movement: Inside the AFL-CIO*, ed. Jo-Ann Mort (London: Verso, 1998), pp. 179-187.

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