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Sara Steffens thought the hard part of forming a union was the initial months spent talking to her newspaper colleagues and collecting signed cards from them seeking union representation.

But the toughest days still were ahead: six weeks of anti-union propaganda and scare tactics leading up to the union election among 230 workers at nine MediaNews-owned papers in the East Bay area of California.

At meetings big and small, employees were told they'd have to schedule their bathroom breaks through the union, that there wouldn't be any more raises, that workers couldn't have flexible shifts or expect good story assignments, that a contract could take years — or forever — to bargain, that layoffs were likely.

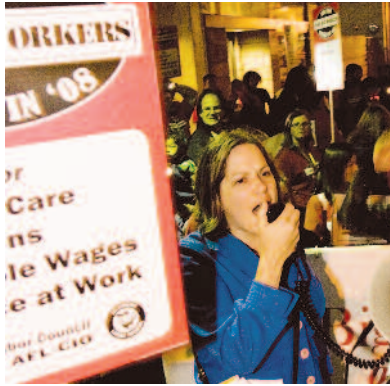
"They never came right out and said, 'If you vote for the union, we will have layoffs.' But I don't think a lot of people missed the message," Steffens said.

Last June, the 230 workers at nine newspapers voted for representation by the California Media Workers Guild, which was working with CWA in a "One Big Bang" campaign. Just two weeks later, 29 workers were fired, two-thirds of them union supporters. Steffens, an award-winning reporter at the Contra Costa Times, was among them.

Management claimed layoffs "weren't based on seniority or merit or skills, that they were just taking positions that they didn't need or couldn't afford anymore," Steffens said. No one who opposed union representation was let go.

The regional National Labor Relations Board sided with MediaNews, claiming there was no proof that the

'Manager Asked for Daily Counts on Who Supported the Union — That's No Secret Ballot'



Reporter Sara Steffens speaks at a campaign rally as workers at nine newspapers owned by Media News fight for union representation. Steffens and 28 other workers were fired two weeks after voting for TNG-CWA representation.

company had targeted union supporters. The case has been appealed to the NLRB in Washington, D.C.

The company clearly knew who the union activists were, and was pretty sure how most people were voting, Steffens said. The captive audience meetings gave managers plenty of clues and they demanded information from lower-level editors.

That makes the claims of Employee Free Choice Act opponents that unions want to take away secret ballot elections especially galling, Steffens said. "That just kills me, the idea that all these companies are trying to protect our rights," she said. "We had a manager who admitted that he was being asked for daily counts of where everyone he supervised stood. How is that a secret ballot?"

Steffens, now a TNG-CWA organizer, believes the Employee Free Choice Act "would be a real deterrent" to employers who use firings to get rid of

union activists and intimidate others. For the first time, companies could face serious fines and damage awards. Currently, all wronged workers can expect — following years of fighting their case at the NLRB and in the courts — is lost wages minus anything they've earned in the meantime.

Just before Steffens and 28 other workers in the Bay Area News Group-East Bay were let go, Steffens said her husband asked, 'If you lose your job was the union stuff still worth it?'

Steffens responded: "I didn't even have to think about my answer. I just said, 'Yes, of course.'

"I won't lie: My emotions have swung wildly: Shock. Anger. Sadness. Disbelief. And anger all over again. After all my years here, the hard work, the big stories, the little stories, the side projects, the things I didn't have to do but did anyway — after all that, this is what I get?

"Right now, 28 coworkers throughout the Bay Area News Group-East Bay know just how I feel. So it's fair to ask again: With my own job on the chopping block, was the union stuff still worth it? Yes. Yes. A hundred times yes. And I'd do it again, every bit of it. What we accomplished has not been undone. Our union isn't going anywhere."

Steffens says: "I think the state of the economy and the state of the newspaper industry makes this a perfect time for unions and the Employee Free Choice Act. I think workers need a voice now more than ever. Where newsrooms are organized, unions have a say in what's going on and are working with management to try to build something better. We're trying to be part of the solution."