

Why Journalists Are Walking Out of Newsrooms in Protest

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16 hours ago
Key insights:

On Thursday, employees at two major newspapers—The New York Times and The Philadelphia Inquirer—took the day off in protest of the way their newsrooms have chosen to cover the inflamed racial justice protests currently taking place.

And with media unions ramping up debate about newsroom diversity, approaches to editorial decisions and even divestment from police unions within their labor networks, it's likely that more newsrooms will see internal protests, too.

At The New York Times, over two dozen backend employees working on product engineering and publishing tools decided to collectively call in sick on Thursday. The move was part of overall outrage across departments regarding the op-ed published Wednesday by Republican Sen. Tom Cotton of Arkansas in which Cotton urges that the military be called in to disperse Black Lives Matter protests.

In the op-ed, Cotton refers to the protests opposing police killings of unarmed Black Americans as an “orgy of violence” committed by “bands of miscreants,” “nihilist criminals” and “cadres of left-wing radicals like antifa ... [with] anarchic purposes.” The senator has also previously referred to the Southern Poverty Law Center as a “political hate group” because it lists organizations he aligns with on its hate map alongside white supremacist groups, anti-LGBTQ and anti-Muslim

organizations, and more.

In response to Cotton's op-ed, the newspaper's union issued a rapid response.

The @nyguild and @NYTimesGuild issues the following statement in response to a clear threat to the health and safety of journalists we represent. New York Times employees will send a letter directly to Times management about their concerns.
<https://t.co/GRPpKYxM2p>

– NYTimesGuild (@NYTimesGuild) June 4, 2020

Twitter/NYTimesGuild

"[Cotton's editorial] undermines the journalistic work of our members, puts our Black staff members in danger, promotes hate, and is likely to encourage further violence," reads the statement from The NewsGuild of New York. "Invariably, invoking state violence disproportionately hurts Black and brown people. It also jeopardizes our journalists' ability to work in the field safely and effectively."

Several New York Times staffers—including Opinion section editors who apparently were unaware of the piece before it was published—tweeted statements shortly after 4:30 p.m. on Wednesday saying the op-ed put staff, and all Black people and protesters, in danger.

Twitter/Kwameopam

Twitter/craftingmystyle

Twitter/MaraGay

Twitter/JenParker

Adweek spoke with several New York Times staffers who asked to remain anonymous.

One New York Times employee told Adweek that the staff was meeting with its union on Thursday to discuss a wider company walkout in protest. And a letter to the newspaper's publishers and leadership, signed by over 500 employees and published by

Slate on Thursday, said Cotton's op-ed is full of inaccuracies that were not fact-checked, is a dangerous call for violence against the American people and asked for several remedies including adding more comment moderators to the paper's Community team.

At the Philadelphia Inquirer, journalists of color and their allies walked off the job (albeit virtually) on Thursday after sending an open letter to leadership. The staff protest was sparked by a column published Monday about the protests and damage to stores with the headline "Buildings Matter, Too"—a riff on the Black Lives Matter movement that struck many staffers as blithe and offensive.

"It's no coincidence that communities hurt by systemic racism only see journalists in their neighborhoods when people are shot or buildings burn down," reads the open letter from Philadelphia Inquirer reporters. "It takes commitment to correct and improve that relationship. It is an insult to our work, our communities, and our neighbors to see that trust destroyed—and makes us that much more likely to face threats and aggression. The carelessness of our leadership makes it harder to do our jobs, and at worst puts our lives at risk."

Twitter/BrandonTrevion

The tensions inside newsrooms are likely exacerbated by the pressure journalists are under to cover the protests even though doing so can put reporters in danger both in terms of exposure during the Covid-19 pandemic and in terms of police violence that has already seen reporters arrested, hit with batons and injured by flash-bang grenades on camera.

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