

**Los Angeles Times Guild
bargaining survey report
May 2018**



Summary

The L.A. Times Guild's first bargaining survey confirmed what we already knew: Times staffers feel overworked and undervalued.

The survey was sent to 374 newsroom staffers March 19. Over about three weeks, we received 289 responses, or roughly 77% of members. We also conducted small group meetings led by delegates and bargaining committee members throughout March and April.

What we found was that staff attrition in recent years has forced many people to take on more day-to-day work while leaving them feeling more vulnerable to cuts. Increased job duties often do not mean an increase in pay, and across the newsroom wages have not kept up with the cost of living in Southern California. In fact, with the rising costs of healthcare and parking, as well as the elimination of benefits such as shift differentials and holiday pay, many Times employees feel their compensation has decreased over the years. The problem is worse for staffers of Times Community News, who report working second jobs or living with their parents to make ends meet.

While people generally report having positive relationships with their peers and direct supervisors, many do not feel respected by upper management. The pay disparities faced by women and people of color, in particular, are perceived as part of a company culture that does not value minority workers.

These are issues we organized around. The survey results demonstrate that the Guild has a mandate to address these issues with the company and develop a strong contract that would help keep people who are already here as well as make the newsroom a more attractive place to potential new employees.

Results

Job security

How secure do you feel in your job?

Secure: 18.9%
Somewhat secure: 55.1%
Somewhat insecure: 20%
Insecure: 6%

How long do you plan to stay at The Times?

Just a year or two: 1.8%
Depends on what other opportunities come along: 35%
For the foreseeable future: 38.2%
I hope to retire from The Times: 25.1%

How important is establishing protections against layoffs?

88.7% of respondents said it was important (37.4%) or very important (51.3%)

Ranked benefits and protections in the event of layoffs:

1. Extra severance (2.45 average)
2. Extended healthcare (2.96 average)
3. Callback right (3.77 average)
4. Transfer rights (4.0 average)
5. Bridging service periods (4.86 average)
6. No NDAs (4.88 average)
7. Job training (4.9 average)

Sample comments:

- *“In the event of layoffs, it would be nice to have at least a month's notice so reporters can get their affairs in order/start looking for another job. It'd also be helpful to know how long our financial runways are. If I lose my job today, I am financially fucked. But if I know I have two more pay cycles before I lose my job, I can plan for that.”*
- *“At TCN, job insecurity is directly linked to the health/future of our papers as a whole. We're more worried about our papers closing down than random LAT-wide layoffs that might include us.”*
- *“As a metpro, job security isn't something that typically comes with the position. The only real security I feel stems from the fact that I know that myself and other fellows are the lowest paid employees in the newsroom.”*

Summary: Job insecurity was a driving motivation behind supporting unionization. Older workers in particular feel targeted for layoffs and buyouts, while Metpros feel particularly vulnerable because they don't feel like full-time, permanent staffers. Workers in Times Community News fear those operations will be shut down entirely.

Wages and retirement benefits

Based on what you know about the job market, how do you feel your salary compares with others who perform similar jobs to yours at other news outlets?

I make more 10.6%
I make about the same 20.8%
I make less 43%
I don't know 25.7%

Do you feel affected by a wage gap in this newsroom?

Yes: 40% total 58% women 21% men 34% white 66% non-white
No: 24% total 11% women 40% men 65% white 35% non-white
I don't know: 36% total 31% women 39% men 42% white 58% non-white

How important is it to have a starting minimum salary by position?

71% said "important" (37.1%) or "very important" (32.25%)

How important is it to have a clearly defined pay schedule/progression based on years of service with The Times?

78% said "important" (32.5%) or "very important" (45.5%)

How important are cost-of-living increases to you?

92.7% said "important" or "very important"

How important is an increase in the employer's 401(k) match?

79.2% said "important" (38.9%) or "very important" (40.3%)

Summary: The high cost of living in Southern California, the lack of raises in recent years and the rising costs of healthcare all contribute to financial insecurity. Metpros and Times Community News workers in particular bear this burden. Compensation is also believed to be a driving factor in our struggle to retain talent.

- *"Seeing my financial situation remain stagnant as all my other expenses rise year after year has got me looking for greener pastures."*
- *"I feel like I can just pay my bills/basic expenses every month, and that's not really sustainable in the long term."*

- *“My pay doesn't reflect my 14 years with TCN or my 22 years total experience of working in newspaper production. It has also utterly failed to stay anywhere near the cost of living in Southern California, especially my rent. Although I enjoy my job and the people I work with, in financial terms it's pointless.”*

Healthcare benefits

What do you think of your plan at The Times?

Satisfied 65.6% Very satisfied 9.3% Not satisfied 25.1%

Tronc has said it is considering eliminating the Signature PPO plan. How important is preserving that plan (or a comparable one under Soon-Shiong's ownership)?

54.7% said “important” or “very important”

Selected comments:

- *“What I can afford, as a woman in my 30s, is essentially disaster insurance. And still, if something were to happen to me, I would be financially ruined because of the high deductible.”*
- *“The Signature PPO plan is our best plan, yet many friends at other companies have far superior health benefits. Stronger health benefits package is an important part of opening contract.”*
- *“As a foreign correspondent, there is no good health care plan for us. I end up never using my plan since its nearly impossible seeing a doctor abroad on the plan. Instead, I pay for all medical expenses out-of-pocket.”*

Summary: Wages have stagnated, but healthcare costs keep rising. People are largely disappointed with current dental and vision benefits. The issue is even more difficult for foreign and national correspondents whose choices are more limited because they don't live in California.

Paid time off

For you personally, how fair is the flexible time off policy?

Fair: 49.7% Unfair: 24.1% I don't know: 26.2%

On the whole, how fair is the flexible time off policy?

Fair: 18.9% Unfair: 40.6% I don't know: 40.6%

How important do you consider restoring the policy of accrued time off?

57.4% said “important” (32.4%) or “very important” (25%)

How important is it for the company to provide paid parental leave and other types of leave?

87.3% said “important” (25.7%) or “very important” (60.8%)

Sample comments:

- *“I’m not opposed to flex time. But establishing guaranteed vacation/sick minimums on top of a flex schedule might help ensure no one is denied the opportunity to take time off. Or at least ensure those who are will be compensated.”*
- *“The flexible time off policy in conjunction with key positions in my department remaining unfilled have meant significantly less time off for me -- plus regular work on days off without compensation -- than under the previous arrangement. There appears to be little interest among supervisors in ensuring a reasonable work-life balance.”*
- *“Flexible time off depends on who’s approving your time. My boss is understanding so I feel that the time off program is fair but it’s not the program itself that’s fair, it’s the judgement of those who implement it. So I’d say it’s not fair.”*
- *“Our current parental leave policy -- or lack thereof -- is a straight-up joke, an insult to mothers and fathers and one of the key reasons why I wanted to unionize.”*
- *“Research has shown that women come back to jobs after pregnancy if they’re happy in their jobs. Additionally, research has shown that if paternity leave is offered and encouraged, the wage gap among men and women is less drastic. It’s important that people feel like they can be parents and journalists and don’t leave for less time-consuming jobs.”*
- *“Under guild representation at a previous employer, comp time was recognized as actual overtime compensation. So it was formally recorded and recorded at time and a half. You cannot have a genuine comp time system that relies on random ‘take some time off’ comments from an editor. This is one of the most abused practices at The Times.”*

Summary: Although people are largely personally happy with flexible time off, there are widespread concerns that the policy varies by department or manager and is vulnerable to abuse. Additionally, the company’s parental leave policy is limited and confusing.

Quality-of-life and other issues

How important is it for the company to provide career development opportunities? (Examples include financial support for training, subsidies to attend professional conferences or to learn a new skill or language)

66.5% said “important” (34.1%) or “very important” (32.4%)

How important is it to stabilize the cost of parking?

74.9% said “important” (31.7%) or “very important” (43.2%)

Do you feel like you’re being treated fairly at work?

Yes: 73.5% No: 26.5%

How approachable is your supervisor?

Very approachable 56.1%

Approachable 31.2%

Somewhat approachable 9.8%

Not approachable 2.8%

What other benefits would you be interested in?

Lowered or tiered parking costs 166 (60.6%)

Comp time recognition 146 (53.3%)

Increased mileage reimbursement 108 (39.4%)

Increased commuter/transit benefits 94 (34.3%)

Night/early shift pay differential 94 (34.3%)

Childcare benefits 74 (27%)

Student loan repayment help 61 responses (22.3%)

Increased phone plan reimbursement 60 (21.9%)

Company cars 51 (18.6%)

Tuition help 45 (16.4%)

Selected comments

- *“Our newspaper talks a great deal about the importance of diversity but doesn’t do a good job acting on it. It is absolutely vital that we hire more women and people of color to leadership positions and as reporters.”*
- *“By my direct supervisors, I feel I am treated fairly. But coming out of the Metpro program, I feel my salary is artificially low and even after receiving some raises, I am stuck at a level below what people with similar experience are paid when they get hired in other ways.”*
- *“I feel like a lack of a clear job description for my position has led to me inheriting numerous responsibilities that I consider above my pay grade as people have left the company.”*

- *“Because of very tight staffing, I do feel an unfair burden of keeping things afloat. I do not take real vacations because no one else is available to write all the stories for my paper, and when I do take short trips (under 1 week) it is typical for me to “bank” stories the week before, or to do all my reporting before I leave and write stories on vacation, though I’ve been known to conduct interviews while on vacation.”*

Summary: Most people feel respected and treated fairly by their co-workers and direct supervisors, but view upper management and the company much more negatively. This is particularly an issue among current and former Metpros but not limited to them. Understaffing and ill-defined job duties also contribute to making people feel overworked and underpaid.

Proposals

Common proposals:

- **Pay:** Resolve the pay equity issue and secure an across-the-board raise. Cost-of-living increases, separate from proposed annual step raises. Holiday pay and shift differentials. Increased pay for Times Community News employees.
- **Job security:** Advance notice of layoffs and mandatory buyout offers. Other proposals, by priority, include: Extra severance, extended healthcare, callback rights, transfer rights, bridging service periods, no NDAs and job training.
- **Healthcare:** Lower healthcare costs, maintain a PPO plan, LGBTQ-friendly plans.
- **Parking:** Lower or tiered parking fees. Additionally, employees in Sacramento and Fountain Valley don’t pay for parking and want to ensure that this is maintained.
- **Career development:** Funding to attend conferences or take classes as well as tuition aid.
- **Retirement benefits:** Increase the 401(k) match. Some staffers have also suggested restoring the pension plan, though this appears to be a pretty small group.
- **Time off:** Returning to accrued time off appears to be largely preferred. Otherwise, establishing a consistent policy for approving flexible time off and requiring minimums to ensure people get time off.
- **Parental leave**
- **Metpro reform**

Other suggested proposals:

- **Comp time recognition:** a system that actually tracks comp time instead of it being between employees and supervisors off the books.

- Company cars or pool cars: People who already use company cars want that maintained. Pool cars -- kept at the office instead of driven home by individual employees -- would enable more reporters to use public transit to get to work without worrying about what they'd do if they got sent out on breaking news.
- Increased subsidies for public transit use
- A codified policy for working remotely
- Resale rights/licensing for photos
- Equipment -- photographers say they want to be able to keep certain gear, like cameras or lenses, when they leave through a buyout
- Student loan repayment help
- Priority for hiring internally when positions open up -- this proposal includes formalizing a path for TCN employees into the Times, whether it's through Metpro or priority when positions become vacant.
- Limits on time periods people can be interns or contract employees.
- Internal freelance and compensation for temporary assignments: Employees who perform work for other departments, like a copy editor who writes for another section, should be compensated for that work. Similarly, employees who take temporary assignments, such as TCN employees or editorial assistants being moved to fill vacancies in LAT departments or reporters filling in as editors, should be paid appropriately during that assignment.
- A mental healthcare advocate in the newsroom or counseling/therapy
- Hazardous duty pay, comp time, equipment
- HR hearing process for harassment or discrimination
- Skills training and professional development
- Increased cellphone stipend -- TCN employees say they're still using company-provided Blackberry phones and don't have a stipend option at all, which they'd prefer

Follow-up

Recommended for further surveying or clarification

Seniority: The biggest concern, predictably, is about how seniority will be used as a factor in layoffs. People are eager to talk about it, but they also need more information on what specific proposals could look like.

- *"This survey did not ask any questions about my stance on seniority as a method for determining layoffs. Why? I believe we should all be able to weigh in on such a decision. We were told repeatedly during the union drive that we would have the chance to pick and select and design a seniority policy that best fits what we all want. Was that true?"*

- *“The survey did not cover the seniority issue, which I think is extremely important. In the case of layoffs, a straight seniority clause (first one in, last one out) is extremely unfair and bad business for the paper.”*
- *“Employees who have the most seniority and high productivity should be the last to be laid off.”*

Merit-based raises: There appears to some confusion or concern that the union would do away with merit-based raises. We should improve our messaging on this.

- *“If you get scheduled increases, you may end up discouraging merit increases and just perpetuate the exodus of our best talent. There shouldn't be an agenda where everybody gets paid the same.”*
- *“I don't have complaints about my pay per se. But I do want a recognition for bargaining purposes that it took 40 years to get to this pay, and it should not mean that I'm passed by for merit increases as I was in 2016. I started here making minimum wage, after all.”*
- *“As long as I have the floor -- I do think merit pay has its place. If we try to take every tool out of management's hands, we'll look like the L.A. Unified teachers' union, coddling mediocrity. Similarly I think tenure and performance reports should both be considered in layoff decisions.”*

Missing department group meeting notes:

Opinion
Sports
Politics
Metpro
D.C.