Nonfiction

Newsboys

For two weeks in 1899, thousands of poor but determined kids stood up to two of the most powerful men in the world.  

By Kim Hill
"Extra! Extra!"

Read all about it! Bridge collapses!

Crazy Alhorn shouted at the top of his lungs, waving the latest edition of the New York World newspaper over his head. It was a hot July afternoon in New York City in 1899, and Crazy was sweating under his woolen cap and tattered clothes. The air smelled of horses, garbage, and wafts of cigar smoke and perfume from the men and women who were heading home from work. Every so often, someone would hold out a penny to Crazy, and he would reach into his bag and hand over a newspaper. Little did Crazy know that he and his friends would soon be front-page news themselves.

Seven days a week, rain or snow or broiling sun, Crazy stood on his corner selling newspapers. He was a "newsie," one of thousands of boys and some girls who sold newspapers. While waiting for each new edition of the paper to be printed, he hung around outside the newspaper offices with the other newsies. They drank soda pop and coffee, threw balls in the street, pitched pennies, and played dice games. Most newsies were poor and lived with their families in cramped apartments known as tenements. Others had no homes and slept in alleyways.
Fourteen-hour days

For Crazy, selling papers wasn’t as bad as working in a coal mine or in a factory making shirts. He was outside all the time and could talk with friends. But the job wasn’t easy either, and being successful was tricky. Each day, he had to buy the newspapers he would sell with money from his own pocket. The cost was 50 cents for 100 papers. If he sold all the papers, he could make a decent profit—enough to buy a bit of meat for his family’s dinner and candy for himself. But in bad weather, or when the news was boring, people didn’t buy as many papers. Crazy was stuck with the newspapers he didn’t sell—and out the money he’d spent to buy them. Sometimes, he worked 14-hour days, just so he could sell all the papers.

In late July, turning a profit became tougher for newsies. The newspaper business was in a slump. Joseph Pulitzer, who owned the New York World, and William Randolph Hearst, who owned the New York Journal, were two of America’s biggest newspaper publishers. They were unhappy with their slumping profits. They thought about raising the price of newspapers, but worried that customers wouldn’t pay. So they came up with a different plan: They would charge the newsies more for their newspapers. Instead of 50 cents for a stack of 100 papers, the newsies would now have to pay 60 cents.

The newsies were outraged. A dime was nothing to millionaires like Hearst and Pulitzer, but it was worth a small fortune to the newsies. Yet it seemed there was nothing they could do. Or was there?

Strikes across the country

During that summer of 1899, workers around the country were protesting their working conditions. Railroad workers, freight handlers, and others stopped working and demanded higher wages, shorter hours, and safer work environments. These work stoppages were known as “strikes.”

Striking was risky for workers. Some companies fired the strikers and brought in new people to take their places. Other companies hired armed men to attack the strikers if they didn’t return to their jobs. Despite these threats, a group of newsies decided to strike too. They
Some newsies were in their teens, while others were as young as 8 years old. Do you think working as a newsie was a good job for a child?

In 1899, workers around the country, like these coat makers, were striking in hopes of getting higher wages and better working conditions. In what ways was going on strike risky for workers?

sent a message to Hearst and Pulitzer and demanded that they lower the price of their newspapers to 50 cents, or the newsies would refuse to sell them.

When Pulitzer and Hearst refused to give in to their demands, the newsies got organized. On July 19, they called a meeting at City Hall Park. Their leader was a one-eyed boy called Kid Blink, who stood up in front of the crowd and told the newsies they should not sell the World or the Journal. He said they would win the struggle, as long as they all stuck together.

The next day, Crazy was one of approximately 300 newsies who went on strike against the World and the Journal. Within days, thousands of newsies from other parts of New York and New Jersey also “boycotted,” or refused to sell, those papers. Together, they marched down the streets carrying signs and wearing placards. “Please don’t buy the Evening Journal and World,” one sign said, “because the newsboys has struck.”

Bystanders cheered, tossing coins into the newsies’ paths. Competing newspapers ran enthusiastic stories praising the newsies, obviously enjoying that Hearst and Pulitzer were having problems.

The excitement reached a peak on July 24, when thousands of newsies crammed into New Irving Hall for a rally. Shouting to be heard over the cheering crowd, Kid Blink urged the strikers to stand firm. When the meeting ended, newsies streamed into the streets in a raucous parade that lasted late into the night.

**Newsies going hungry**

But the mood of celebration soon faded. Violence broke out throughout the city as some strikers attacked “scabs,” newsies who continued to sell the World and the Journal. They attacked newsstands selling those papers and threw garbage at deliverymen. At least eight boys were arrested for destroying property or fighting.

Meanwhile, many of the striking newsies were going hungry. Those who had no homes were hit the hardest. Crazy bought 1,500 pretzels and distributed them among the hungry strikers. With the beatings, arrests, and loss of income, the situation was becoming desperate. And Hearst and Pulitzer showed no signs of backing off.
During the strike, newsies paraded through the streets, and many people cheered them on. Why do you think most people took the side of the newsies?

down. They hired musclemen to deliver and sell their papers. They said business was better than ever.

Two weeks into the strike, Kid Blink suddenly vanished. Some suspected he'd switched sides. Could Pulitzer and Hearst have paid Kid Blink to drop out of the strike?

Making progress

The answer came on July 24, when a few newsies saw Kid Blink wearing a fancy new outfit. They chased after him, yelling "traitor!" Before they could catch him, two policemen interrupted the chase and took Kid Blink off to safety.

All seemed lost for the newsies. They were exhausted, demoralized, betrayed, and in some cases, literally starving.

It turned out, however, that Hearst and Pulitzer were suffering, too, and that the strike was terrible for business. Sales of both papers were down by more than 60 percent. Pressured by their mounting losses, the men struck a deal with the newsies. The price would stay at 60 cents per 100 papers, but newsies could return their unsold papers for a refund.

It was not a total victory for the newsies, but it was progress. And there was the satisfaction of knowing that they—some of the poorest kids in the country—had challenged two of the mightiest men in the world.

By that August, Crazy Alhorn was once again standing on his corner, and waving his papers in the air. "Extra! Extra! Read all about it," he shouted. "Newsboy strike ends!"

Write to Win!

Do you think working as a newsie was a good job for a kid? Write a paragraph telling us why or why not. We'll pick 10 entries and send each writer a copy of the book Kids on Strike!, by Susan Campbell Bartoletti. Send your entry to "Kids Strike Contest" by November 15, 2006. See page 2 for more details.

Practice your paragraphs with Sentence Chef!