



# The Frontier Reporter

Winter Edition 2023-24

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## Where the Guild gets its leverage and power during contract negotiations

*By Sandy Tan* – You may be wondering what Guild lanyards, shirts, happy hours and social media messages have to do with union contract negotiations. The short answer is: Everything.

February marked the start of contract negotiations with The Buffalo News and its parent company, Lee Enterprises. Our out-of-state corporate owners have been a source of heartburn and worry ever since we were purchased by the company in 2020, and this year, the company is proposing serious changes that threaten our job security, health and retirement benefits and compensation.

We have a strong, five-member bargaining team, but they have very little power on their own. They rely on the support of the membership.

Our company wants to settle negotiations as swiftly as possible, even if that means driving us into a corner and eventually threatening us with impasse, essentially a standoff where neither side is willing to compromise any further. That could allow the company to legally impose bad terms on all union members.

Given that legal hammer, it can feel like the deck is stacked against us.

But we have never been the kind of the union that lies down in the face of a bad deal. On the contrary, the Buffalo Newspaper Guild contract is the strongest in the Lee chain, and a big part of the reason for that is our willingness to fight for what we need and deserve.

Our leverage comes through mobilization. Mobilization involves the participation of all union members in activities that show the union membership stands together and will fight unfair proposals that hurt us.

Unlike some other newspaper unions, we have the financial resources to sustain our mobilization efforts. Our defense fund exceeds \$1 million. We have already budgeted \$10,000 toward mobilization actions and have submitted a grant proposal to the international NewsGuild for nearly \$30,000 in additional funding assistance. We also have an active Mobilization Committee that plans activities and develops new strategies every week.



*Guild President Jon Harris addresses a small crowd at Fitz Books & Waffles in Buffalo in March.*

Companies don't like labor unrest. They don't want negative attention and publicity. In the case of Lee Enterprises and Buffalo News management, they aren't thrilled for the public to learn about everything they've stripped away from our news organization over the last few years.

Mobilization job actions include small things like everyone wearing lanyards, stickers or shirts that identify us as Guild members, or social events that bring us together to learn about company and Guild proposals. It includes sharing our message publicly,

raising community awareness through social media and public events.

When the company becomes dug in on destructive positions, job actions can involve things like petitions, letter-writing campaigns, byline strikes, and soliciting public support from the community leaders. Strikes – walking off the job – are the most extreme form of mobilization.

What we need now is more member participation.



*New Guild stickers ordered that promote our website ProtectLocalJournalism.com*

Standing together and keeping pressure on the company helps create the kind of conditions that can lead to more open mindedness by management

and a settlement that is fair to employees. It keeps The Buffalo News a place where employees can still build a rewarding career.

The more members actively participate in job actions and solidarity efforts, the more we can rally the community to our cause, the more success we'll have. Conversely, if members disengage, or decide that the union's work is somebody else's responsibility, the company feels more empowered to play hardball with our bargaining team, and everybody is hurt.

Please do your part by staying informed and engaged. Participate in Guild activities and share our social media messages. If you are not receiving Guild emails or text messages, please let your union steward or officers know and check your junk email folder so Guild messages aren't marked as spam. Please make sure to add [buffalnewsguild@send.mailchimpapp.com](mailto:buffalnewsguild@send.mailchimpapp.com) to your contacts.

If you have any ideas, questions or suggestions for mobilization, or know of anyone willing to offer public testimony about the importance of The Buffalo News and local journalism, please email [buffaloguildmobilization@gmail.com](mailto:buffaloguildmobilization@gmail.com)

## The big stuff on the bargaining table

Since negotiations began last month, both sides have settled a number of minor issues. Here's the big stuff that's left, as of mid-March. This list is not all-inclusive:

### Major proposals from the company so far:

- Cut severance: Cut severance in half, to one week for every year of service, capped at 26 weeks. In the current contract, severance is one week's pay for each six months of service, capped at 48 weeks for most members, and capped at 30 weeks for those hired after Aug. 1, 2021.
- Cut overtime: Eliminate daily overtime and only pay overtime for hours exceeding 37.5 in a week.
- Eliminate extended sick leave: Get rid of extended sick leave and replace it with Lee's short-term and long-term disability policy.
- Slash mileage reimbursements: Pay a fixed – low – cents-per-mile rate instead of the IRS rate, which is currently 67 cents per mile.
- Cut health and dental benefits: Replace many existing health and dental benefits plans with worse ones, and eliminate the current flex credits system.

- Terminate the pension plan: Replace the frozen pension plan with an annuity or one-time lump-sum payment.
- Weaken job security: Allow the company more freedom to bypass existing seniority language so it can more easily cherry pick who to lay off.

*The Guild has rejected many of these company proposals and submitted counter proposals on others.*

### Major proposals from the Guild so far:

- Adoption of a strong policy limiting the use of artificial intelligence.
- Increase monthly stipend for mobile phone reimbursement.
- Gain greater jurisdiction over digital content and the current non-Guild Albany and Washington Bureau reporting positions.
- Provide district managers paid time off if bad weather prevents the paper from being delivered.

# The latest on Lee Enterprises' financial health

*By Jon Harris* – In its most recent fiscal quarter, The Buffalo News' parent company reported continued digital growth as well as declines in print.

For the three months that ended Dec. 24, Lee Enterprises reported about \$156 million in operating revenue, a 16% decline from a year earlier.

Digital revenue totaled \$71 million, which represents 46% of the company's total revenue. (As a point of comparison, 41% of Gannett's revenue comes from digital sources.)

Within that, digital advertising revenue declined 3% to \$46.5 million, while digital subscription revenue grew 58% to \$19.5 million.

On the print side, print advertising revenue dropped 42% to \$24.4 million in the quarter, while print subscription revenue declined 23% to about \$52 million.

While print subscriptions are dropping, the print subscription revenue of \$52 million still represents more than 70% of the company's overall subscription revenue.

Digital advertising, meanwhile, has blown past print advertising, with digital accounting for 66% of the company's ad revenue.

On the bottom line, Lee remains profitable, recording net income in the quarter of \$1 million.

Finally, it looks like Lee has a new largest shareholder. In a regulatory filing March 19, India-based Quint Digital Ltd disclosed a more than 10% stake in Lee.

Filings show Quint has built its stake in Lee over the last couple months, which could explain some of the unusually high trading volume in the company's stock as well as some of the fluctuations in its share price.

There hasn't been much else publicly disclosed.

Quint Digital is the owner of The Quint, which was launched in March 2015 and describes itself as "India's fastest-growing pure-play digital news and views platform."



## Major Guild happenings since Fall Edition

- **December 2023** – Guild holds a successful holiday party and honors Guild and alumni-chapter member Richard “Dick” Baldwin, the Buffalo News’ longtime nightside city editor and veteran newsman, in recognition of his contributions to The Buffalo News, to the Courier Express and to the Guild. The Guild also establishes a Workplace Culture Committee and sends a series of recommendations to newsroom management to improve low morale.



*Dick Baldwin holds up his gift from the Guild, a front-page plate (which was later framed) from the last Buffalo News print run at the production building at 1 News Plaza, before press production was outsourced to Cleveland. Baldwin was honored by Guild member Scott Scanlon, left, who recounted Baldwin's long career and achievements.*

- **January 2024** – Guild flags a delay in dental benefits and the delay in issuing dental benefit cards, demanding an explanation from the company. The Guild also provides follow-up information to assist members in getting an electronic ID card before the physical one arrives. The Guild also begins

preparing for negotiations with the company. The five-member bargaining team includes President Jon Harris, Administrative Officer Kim Leiser, editorial members Steve Watson and Trey Wydysz, and District Manager Rick Wiorkowski.

- **February 2024** – Guild issues a joint statement with the United Media Guild on the day of the Lee’s annual shareholder meeting demanding more investment in its news organizations. Negotiations with the company begin in earnest, with the company making a series of harmful proposals (see page 2). The Guild convenes a Mobilization Committee that begins to meet weekly. First social media video highlighting the work of the Guild and the negative impact of Lee Enterprises’ ownership goes out across all major social media platforms.
- **March 2024** – Guild hosts a successful community mixer event at Fitz Books & Waffles to raise awareness of the Guild’s negotiations with the company and draw public support for Guild efforts.

## Comings & Goings from The Buffalo News/Hamburg Sun

### Comings

Justin Sondel - Editorial/Hamburg Sun - FT  
Nicole Crage - DM - PT

### Goings

Melissa Burrowes- Circulation - FT  
Cathy McPhee - ABC - FT  
Andrew Galarneau - Editorial - FT  
Maki Becker - Editorial - FT

## Upcoming meetings

The next Executive Committee meetings are scheduled for April 9, May 9 and June 10. The next general membership meeting is scheduled for May 15, though additional membership meetings may be held to update members on the status of negotiations. For an updated meeting schedule, visit: [buffaloguild.org](http://buffaloguild.org)

## Meeting minutes

*Meeting minutes in the Frontier Reporter are abridged. To view full minutes, visit [buffaloguild.org](http://buffaloguild.org), select “Meeting Minutes” tab and enter the password. If you need the password, email [aaron.besecker@gmail.com](mailto:aaron.besecker@gmail.com)*

### Executive Committee Meeting Minutes: Nov. 13, 2023

#### Attendance

**Present:** Vice President Mobilization and Communication Aaron Besecker, District Manager Co-Steward Erik Bridenbaker, Editorial Delegate Mike Harrington, President Jon Harris, District Manager Co-Steward Jason Kremblas, Administrative Officer Kim Leiser, Secretary Mike McAndrew, Editorial Delegate David Robinson, Editorial Delegate Scott Scanlon, Editorial Alternate Delegate Mark Sommer, Past-President Sandra Tan, Vice President Contract Administration Steve Watson, District Manager Co- Steward Rick Wiorkowski, Editorial Delegate Trey Wydysz.

**Absent:** Inside Circulation Steward Melissa Burrowes, Editorial Delegate Rachel Lenzi, Editorial Alternate Delegate Libby March

**Call to order** - Harris called the meeting to order at 5:34 p.m.

#### Approval of Minutes

Sommer motion to approve minutes of Oct. 9 Guild Executive Committee meeting. Second by Scanlon. Approved.

#### President’s Report – Harris

The full time circulation position of audience clerk that we negotiated Lee Enterprises fill to settle our customer service outsourcing grievance about work outsourced to the Philippines is going to be filled internally. An offer letter was sent to a part-time clerk in circulation Miguel Gonzalez to go full-time.

The Hamburg Sun hired Justin Sondel as a reporter starting Oct. 17. We are in the process of getting him signed up for the Guild.

In departures, food writer and critic Andrew Galarneau is planning to leave The News at the end of the month. Margaret Kenny did tell me that they will fill his job. That means we could soon have four openings out there in editorial:

-Andrew’s job

-The current open for an environment and climate reporter (which was the new position from the settlement over the classified ad grievance)

-A housing/equity reporter position to fill Caitlin Dewey’s job.

-A public safety watchdog reporter to fill Lou Michel’s job.

The fall General membership meeting is scheduled Thursday, Nov. 16, at 1 p.m. We’re meeting in person on the 8th floor in Larkinville and then at 5:30 p.m. will have a virtual meeting.

#### Mobilization Report: Besecker

We are planning a holiday party. Kim has done a lot of the work already. Some people have already bought tickets.

We sent out flyers about open enrollment changes.

Tan: Wants to get a fall Frontier Reporter out while it is still fall.

#### Grievance Report: Watson

Some things have come up related to jurisdiction. Photos have run in the print edition that are provided photos or photos taken by reporters. Reporter photos cannot be used in print. It’s an issue with the Lee Design Hub.

Tan: Our past practice on provided photos has been that we only use them in print when a News photographer cannot get to the event to take the photo.

Jurisdiction issue 2: Emily Merkel helped input vote tabulations into a database on Election Night for online publication. Amy Yakawiak double checks those numbers and then takes that info and puts it into the print edition. Margaret Kenny said management doesn't think there is a jurisdictional issue having a non-newsroom person do data entry. We've had sports clerks who were Guild members do this work in the past. We could ask the News to look for volunteers from the Guild.

Executive Committee members discussed this at length. Watson will write another note objecting.

**Leiser:** We have a grievance we will file over advertising handling cash payments that used to be handled by the ABC Department. When we agreed to outsource ABC, the understanding was if there was any work remaining at The News, it had to be done by Guild members. They informed Cathy, who is still there in ABC until the end of the year, that those payments would just be handled by Emily Markel. I sent Tammy Turnbull a letter about this. She talked to Astrid Garcia who said the Guild should file a grievance if it thinks it is a violation. Grievance will be filed.

Besecker: What has happened with the complaint about DMs being told to do hoppers' work?

Leiser: Turnbull acknowledged this violates our contract and the hoppers' contract. She said that shouldn't happen, and they need to hire more hoppers.

## Old Business

### Holiday Party

Harris: We booked Banchette by Rizzos for Thursday, Dec. 14, from 6 to 10 p.m. It's at 550 N. French Road, Amherst. The price is \$10 for members and retirees, \$20 for guests. Tickets include: Buffet dinner and non-alcoholic drinks, drink ticket for the bar, door prizes. For tickets, see Steve Watson in editorial, Kim at the Guild Office, or pay via Venmo to Aaron Besecker at @Besecker-Aaron.

Leiser: We sent out information to our members. You can pay at the door or pay in advance. We've always put \$500 toward door prizes. Banchette was available and had a good price. And free parking. Aaron volunteered to use his personal Venmo account to accept payments. Venmo charges 1.9% plus 10 cents per transaction if the Guild creates its own Venmo business account.

Besecker: I don't think it's worth it for Guild to create its own Venmo.

Tan: Suggest we have a list of everyone who pays via Venmo as a safeguard.

## New Business

### Open Enrollment

Harris: Open Enrollment starts tomorrow and runs through Nov. 27. Only a dozen people were on the Lee VP Mark Hall webinar. He just read through the presentation verbatim, the slide show. The Guild sent out a summary. We have a new dental carrier. It was Wellmark, now it's going to Ameritas. Mark Hall claims 95% of in-network providers are the same. He said all the dental plans have out of network coverage but you have to pay up front.

Tan: Asked a question about whether members will have to get a health screening to qualify for extended disability coverage because we have a new provider.

Leiser: Said she will check. We could set up a time on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving to help members with Open Enrollment questions.

Harris and Leiser will talk with Turnbull about getting a conference room in the newsroom to do that.

## IT scanning work computers

Leiser: Harrington sent me a copy of an email he received from a member of IT staff. His computer was scanned and they found a word document with the word credentials in it. They said you can't have a word doc with the word password or credentials in a file because it's a security risk. What Mike saved was a doc called Hockey Hall of Fame credentials.

Harrington: It's sitting on the desktop of my computer. Who knows what they can find?

Leiser: As a reminder, Guild members should save nothing on their work computer that is not work related.

Tan: If there is a program routinely scanning our computers, our members should know that.

Leiser: Lee is actively scanning computers on a regular basis. They are looking for stuff that can be considered security risks.

## Preparations for Bargaining

Leiser: We usually send a survey to members. We ask them to rate things in order of importance. I have examples of past surveys. Then the bargaining committee is selected by the president. We've tried in the past to have one representative on the committee from each bargaining unit. Look to include Kim, Jon, then at least one editorial member, a district manager, and a circulation rep.

Tan: We usually send out a flyer to all members asking if they want to serve on the committee. It's a good thing to bring up at the General Membership meeting, that a bargaining year is coming up.

Leiser: 180 days before contract expiration, on Feb. 2nd, is when bargaining is supposed to start.

## Circulation stats

McAndrew: We should ask management for print edition circulation numbers for Jan. 1, July 1, and for after the printing was moved to Cleveland.

Leiser: We can ask for the circulation stats.

Wiorkowski: They are down. From what I gather they truck all the papers from Cleveland on one semi. The deadline is 10:30 p.m. when they are supposed to arrive in Buffalo. They showed up at 11:20 p.m. last night. South didn't get their papers till after 1 a.m.

Harris adjourned the meeting at 6:52 p.m.

## Executive Committee Meeting Minutes: Dec. 11, 2023

### Attendance:

**Present:** Vice President Mobilization and Communication Aaron Besecker, Editorial Delegate Mike Harrington, President Jon Harris, District Manager Co-Steward Jason Kremblas, Administrative Officer Kim Leiser, Editorial Delegate Rachel Lenzi, Secretary/Treasurer Mike McAndrew, Editorial Delegate David Robinson, Editorial Delegate Scott Scanlon, Editorial Alternate Delegate Mark Sommer, Past-President Sandra Tan, Vice President Contract Administration Steve Watson, District Manager Co-Steward Rick Wiorkowski, Editorial Delegate Trey Wydysh

**Absent:** District Manager Co-Steward Erik Bridenbaker, Inside Circulation Steward Melissa Burrowes

**Excused:** Editorial Alternate Delegate Libby March

### Call to Order

Harris calls meeting to order at 5:08 p.m.

### Approval of Minutes

Harrington motion to approve minutes of Nov. 13, 2023 meeting. Second by Besecker. Approved.

#### **President's Report - Harris**

In the interest of time, Harris skipped the president's report.

#### **Mobilization Report - Besecker**

I signed up to the Guild new reporter Justin Sondel of the Hamburg Sun.

Our Guild Holiday Party is coming up Thursday.

The Frontier Reporter was published online yesterday by Tan. Deb Sur secured us a photo booth for the Holiday Party.

Harris: Retiree Dick Baldwin will be at the holiday party. He's under hospice care.

Tan: Suggested that we honor Baldwin with an award for being among the longest-serving Guild members.

Leiser: Suggested the Guild give Baldwin as a gift a plate from last print run in Buffalo of The Buffalo News.

Scanlon: Baldwin helped close down the Courier-Express. He helped Stan Lipsey figure out what employees they wanted to bring over to The News from the Courier. He was Niagara County bureau chief for a long time.

Harris: Given his 60 years of service to Buffalo journalism, he agreed the plate is a good gift.

#### **Grievance Report - Watson**

Sent email to News Managing Editor Margaret Kenney getting our concerns on the record about management's use of a non-Guild employee on Election Night to enter election results into a spreadsheet for online.

Outsourcing Grievance. We haven't signed the settlement yet.

Leiser: I drafted the language. We are waiting for it to be cleared by the Lee Enterprises legal department. The terms of the settlement were that they had to hire a full-time person.

Cell phone stipends.

Leiser: You should receive a lump sum of cell phone stipends in the Dec. 22 paycheck, if you haven't been receiving them. I asked the company to audit their paychecks. About 19 people were not getting them. Half the people entitled to them were not getting it. In the future, the last paycheck of the month you should get \$40. Three DMs were getting the wrong amount after they were temporarily promoted to full-time. They were getting the part-time stipend.

Hoppers:

Leiser: Supposedly, The News is hiring more hoppers, and no DMs should be getting instructed to do hopper work.

Vacancies:

Harris: The environment and climate reporting job was posted on jobs websites.

Sommer: It's so distressing that we don't have a full-time arts writer at a paper our size.

Scanlon: The features department doesn't have a full-time reporter.

Sommer: Morale is really bad. It would be helpful for Sheila Rayam to have monthly staff meetings.

Leiser: Management said they will fill Andrew Galarnau's position. They will hire a food and drinks reporter.

#### **Old Business**

#### **Support for Pittsburgh strikers:**

Harris: We adopted two Pittsburgh strikers for the bulk of this year, at \$200 a week per striker, though now we're just adopting one because the other one got a new job. So we're still supporting one to the tune of \$200 a week, and a couple months ago, we loosely talked about stopping support around the end of this year. So we need to revisit that topic and decide what we want to do – obviously, we've essentially cut our costs in half by having only one striker, but we also don't have any idea when this strike will end – it's now been 14 months.

Leiser: Nothing has changed with the strike. Block Communications has not been actively trying to settle the strike.

Tan: They are hiring scabs to do the striking workers' work.

Leiser: As of Sept. 30, we've spent \$20,300 supporting the Pittsburgh strikers, not counting donations to the strike fund and Christmas fund. When you sign up for this, you generally sign up for the duration of the strike. It would cost \$10,400 to fund one striker for the entire year. We spent \$18,000 in the fiscal year Oct. 1-2022 to Sept. 30, 2023. So far this fiscal year we've spent \$2000. The Chicago Guild also has been supporting the strikers.

Scanlon: Motion to continue funding for one striker through the end of June at \$200 a week, and to reevaluate it in April to decide if we want to continue after that. Second by Sommer. Motion is approved.

#### **Holiday party:**

Leiser: We've received RSVPs from 80 people. Last year, we had RSVPs from 90.

#### **New Business**

##### **Lee 4<sup>th</sup> Quarter earnings.**

Harris: Lee reported its fourth quarter earnings this past Thursday, so that was the quarter that ended in late September.

The numbers weren't too bad, but the stock took a roughly 14% hit on Thursday because – I believe – Lee's guidance for next year. They forecast that digital-only subscribers next year would grow 7% companywide to 771,000 subscribers. That's not bad, but the problem is it is slower growth than what the company experienced this year. When asked about it on the call, Lee's CFO said they're focused more on the revenue component of digital subscriptions. The stock did recover about 4% Friday.

In terms of digital versus print, total digital revenue is now 44% of Lee's revenue.

Digital advertising is crushing print advertising. Digital advertising was \$49.3 million in the quarter compared to \$23.3 million in print advertising.

Print subscription in the quarter was about \$59 million, which was a drop of about \$20 million from the same quarter a year ago.

Digital subscription revenue, meanwhile, was almost \$19 million in the quarter, which was up from \$11 million in the same quarter a year ago.

Overall, their numbers are propped up by how much they have cut. They cut \$100 million in costs. The number of employees was 3,300. In the prior September it was 4,400. One out of every four employees is no longer employed there.

##### **Preparations for Contract Bargaining**

Harris: We are working on our preparations for bargaining and getting our team together. Leiser and I are talking. Tan put into

The Frontier Reporter that anyone interested should reach out to us.

**2024 meeting schedule:**

Harris: These are our proposed meeting dates:

Executive Committee meetings:

- January 8
- February 12
- March 11
- April 8 (later changed to April 9 to avoid the eclipse)
- May 13
- June 10
- July 8
- August 12
- September 9
- October 14
- November 11
- December 9

General Membership meetings:

- February 15
- May 15
- August 15
- November 14

Besecker: Motion to approve meeting dates. Second by Tan. Approved.

**Guild T-Shirts:**

Tan: I spoke to Hodgson's Printing, a Guild printing shop, about getting Guild T-shirts. She showed mock-ups of T-shirt designs. Also got a quote of \$290 for 150 lanyards. We could distribute lanyards at start of bargaining. The quote of \$16.89 per shirt is our cost. We usually ask members to pay part of the cost.

She said she has also asked for pricing for putting the Guild logo on polo shirts, but she couldn't find US made polo shirts.

McAndrew: Suggested black T-shirts and red polo shirts.

Leiser: Motion to spend \$300 to buy 150 black and white lanyards. Tan seconds. Motion approved.

**Other discussion**

District managers:

Kremblas: We need The News to hire more DMs. I have 3 part-time DMs that don't work weekends. We have more working Wednesdays than on weekends.

Guild socials:

Sommer: It makes sense to have a more regular schedule of Guild socials after work.

Leiser: The social activities committee could work on this.

Harris: Lee Enterprise's East Region Local News Director Paige Mudd's last day at Lee was earlier this month. Rayam now reports directly to Jason Adrians, vice president of local news.

Harris adjourned the meeting at 6:38 p.m.

**Guild Executive Committee Meeting Minutes: Jan. 8, 2024**

**Attendance:**

**Present:** Vice President Mobilization and Communication Aaron Besecker, Editorial Delegate Mike Harrington, President Jon Harris, Administrative Officer Kim Leiser, Editorial Delegate Rachel Lenzi, Secretary/Treasurer Mike McAndrew, Editorial Delegate David Robinson, Editorial Delegate Scott Scanlon, Editorial Alternate Delegate Mark Sommer, Past-President Sandra Tan, Vice President Contract Administration Steve

Watson, District Manager Co- Steward Rick Wiorkowski, Editorial Delegate Trey Wydysh.

**Absent:** District Manager Co-Steward Erik Bridenbaker, District Manager Co-Steward Jason Kremblas, Editorial Alternate Delegate Libby March.  
Harris Call to Order at 5:34 p.m.

**Approval of Minutes:**

Tan motion to approve minutes with an amendment. Second Wydysh. Approved.

**President's Report – Harris:**

Harris: In the newsroom, we continued to lose people, losing Maki Becker right before Christmas and now sports editor Josh Barnett is leaving. Our workplace culture committee did issue some recommendations to newsroom management, which we'll tackle later in the meeting.

In the newsroom, our editor Sheila will hold a staff meeting this Thursday afternoon, during which I think she'll present some goals for 2024 and, I'm sure, face more than a few questions. And we are busy preparing for negotiations with the company on a new contract.

I'd also like to welcome two new Editorial alternates to the Executive Committee: Natalie Brophy and Ben Tsujimoto.

Members discussed open positions in the newsroom.

Harris: I will create a Google doc to help members prepare questions for Sheila Rayam at the upcoming staff meeting. Members discussed questions they had about hiring, Lee Enterprise's digital strategy and video studio training.

Harrington and Besecker complained that the homepage of [buffalonews.com](http://buffalonews.com) no longer has a line for Local News stories.

Tan : We've been talking about local control over our website for so long. This just reinforces that.

Wydysh: Explained that the digital desk cannot anchor big stories at the top of the homepage, because the stories get sorted by timestamp. So if enough stories come in, a big story will disappear off the homepage.

**Mobilization Report – Besecker**

Tan: New Guild lanyards should be arriving soon and will be distributed to members.

**Grievance Report – Watson**

Watson: We are filing today or tomorrow a grievance over cell phone reimbursements. A number of employees have not received cell phone reimbursement since Lee Enterprises automated the payments.

Leiser: According to Jean Ady, Lee's director of HR systems, the reimbursements should arrive in this week's pay, a lump sum for 10 months at \$40 per month. They had assured us it would be fixed Dec. 22, but it wasn't.

**Old Business**

**Holiday party recap:**

Leiser: \$6,100 was the final cost. That's for the gift cards, dinner, the photo booth and gift for Dick Baldwin, which we had matted and framed. It will be picked up tomorrow and delivered. We had RSVPs from 80 people and 73 showed up. Banchetti's price was \$4,900 including the tip.

Leiser: The only complaint I heard was from one member who said it was located too far away in the Northtowns. But we heard from others who were happy it was in the Northtowns. We have to start planning earlier. Some places were booked in August and September for the entire month of December. I started calling in October. That wasn't early enough.

**Bargaining update:**

Harris: Our contract expires July 31. Leiser and I got an email from Tammy Turnbull, HR director at The Buffalo News, today asking about bargaining dates. A bargaining survey went out today with 20+ questions. We're giving people until Jan. 19 to get it back to us. Leiser, Wiorkowski, Watson, Wydysh and I are the bargaining team. We met last Wednesday and will meet this Wednesday.

Harris described some of the bargaining team's expected priorities.

Leiser: A lot of that is driven by the results of the survey. The usual are wages, benefits and working conditions.

**New Business****Workplace culture:**

Harris: Our workplace culture committee has 9 members. It sent to Rayam, Margaret Kenny and Bruce Andriatch a list of recommended changes to office décor, seating changes to bring teams closer together, better communication through staff meetings, in-person staff led training. A lot of the recommendations are similar to what we presented to them in September when we first moved into the office.

Print circulation numbers:

Executive Committee members discussed the latest print circulation numbers.

Customer service:

Scanlon: An email to the city desk said our customer service phone system was down across all Lee newspapers. And it said they didn't know how long it will take to fix it.

Sports editor position:

Leiser: Deputy Sports Editor and Guild member Steve Trosky becomes interim sports editor when Josh Barnett leaves. He remains a guild member. It's temporary. He cannot discipline. He'll get paid more.

Harris: News management told me they would hire a deputy if Trosky becomes the sports editor.

Environment and climate reporter position:

Harris: Management is bringing in a candidate for in-person interviews for that position. Filling the environment and climate job was a requirement to resolve our outsourcing grievance.

Declining Guild membership:

Leiser: Three years ago, the Guild had 150 members. Now we have around 90. In Editorial, it is down to 51 or 52 in the Guild. In the early 2000s, we had just under 300 total Guild members. At our peak we had like 480 in the Guild. We lost almost the entire ABC staff, the customer service desk, the design desk, and all the other reporters who left. Before that we lost classified, sports clerks and regular clerks.

Brophy: Thanked the Guild for its donation to Hospice in her grandfather's name.

Harris adjourned the meeting at 7:03 p.m.

**Guild Executive Committee Meeting Minutes: Feb. 12, 2024****Attendance**

**Present:** Vice President Mobilization and Communication Aaron Besecker, Editorial Delegate Mike Harrington, President Jon Harris, Administrative Officer Kim Leiser, Editorial Delegate Rachel Lenzi, Secretary/Treasurer Mike McAndrew, Editorial Delegate David Robinson, Editorial Delegate Scott Scanlon, Editorial Alternate Delegate Mark Sommer, Past-President Sandra Tan, Vice President Contract Administration Steve Watson, District Manager Co-Steward Rick Wiorkowski, Editorial Delegate Trey Wydysh.

**Absent:** District Manager Co-Steward Erik Bridenbaker, District Manager Co-Steward Jason Kremblas, Editorial Alternate Delegate Libby March.

Harris called meeting to order at 5:06 p.m.

**Approval of Minutes**

The Jan. 8 minutes were sent out by McAndrew just as the meeting started. Approval of the minutes will be considered at the next meeting to give members time to read them.

**President's Report - Harris**

Obviously, the big topic right now is bargaining for a new contract ahead of our deal's expiration on July 31. We had our first session with the company today, where we heard their opening proposal and asked questions. We expect to present our opening proposal on Thursday. And we'll talk more on this later in the meeting.

Our Workplace Culture Committee's recommendations are having an impact. A new seating chart will be rolled out by management in the next couple of weeks, probably as soon as everyone gets healthy.

The News offered a job late last Tuesday to a candidate for the climate change/environment reporter. They're interviewing food reporter applicants, and we have three jobs posted right now:

- Public safety watchdog reporter
- Albany bureau chief - non-Guild position
- Executive sports editor - non-Guild position

The only open position they are not filling is Lou Michel's.

**Mobilization Report - Besecker**

Local journalism sustainability act: This is a proposed state law that would give tax credits to news companies for employing journalists. Our Guild, we are part of the campaign, probably because we supported the federal version of this bill last year. The Albany Newspaper Guild, State Publishers Association, State Press Association, Rebuild Local News, Hudson Valley Guild, Buffalo Guild are supporting it. We wrote a letter supporting the federal proposal 2 years ago.

**Grievance Report - Watson**

The only thing we did in the past month is put in a grievance for the cell phone reimbursement issue. That it took so long to get the reimbursement to some of our members. Shortly after we filed that the members did get their reimbursements, finally. Everyone who was missing that money should have gotten it last month.

**New Business****Labor Notes Conference:**

Leiser: We are encouraged by the national Guild to send someone to the Labor Notes Conference April 19-21 in Chicago. You'd have to fly in Thursday April 18. There's 4 pages of workshops on the Labor Notes website. The cost to the local is \$1,500 per person. That includes registration, hotel, airfare, per diem. That would be the total cost. It's not something we budgeted for but we should see about doing it.

Besecker - Moves that the Guild pays for up to 5 people to go to the Labor Notes conference. Second by Sommer. Motion approved.

**Reschedule general membership meeting:**

Harris: The meeting was originally scheduled for Thursday, Feb. 15 but we are in bargaining that day. We planned an in-person meeting at lunchtime and virtual meeting in the evening.

Wydysh: Motion to hold virtual meetings at 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. Friday Feb. 16, with an in-person meeting to follow at a future date. Second by Wiorkowski. Approved.

**Old Business**



**Bargaining update:**

Leiser: Our bargaining team - Wiorkowski, Harris, Watson and Wydysh and me - met with the company and we received their opening proposal. We made no counter-proposals or opening proposals.

Among the highlights, or lowlights, of what the company proposed Monday:

- They want severance to be calculated as one weeks' pay for each year of service, capped at 26 weeks. In the current contract, severance is one weeks' pay for each six months' of service, capped at 48 weeks for most members and capped at 30 weeks for those hired after Aug. 1, 2021.
- They want to eliminate daily overtime beyond 7.5 hours in a day and only pay overtime for hours exceeding 37.5 in a week.
- They want to terminate employees who have been absent/out from work for six consecutive months and eliminate the continuation of healthcare, vacation, floats and holidays for those employees.
- They proposed bargaining unit employees hired after July 31, 2024, be capped at three weeks' of vacation a year. This would eliminate the potential to earn 4th and 5th weeks of vacation for anyone hired after that date.
- They want to eliminate extended sick leave and replace it with Lee's short-term and long-term disability policy.
- They want to reimburse for mileage at 40 cents per mile, not the IRS rate (currently 67 cents per mile). Every district manager would lose about \$5,000 a year under the mileage proposal.
- Eliminate various pricing of cellphones for district managers and the cellphone reimbursement for editorial, and implement a flat rate of \$40 for full-time and \$15 for part-time employees.
- They want to have skips for wage groups when it comes to layoffs, so they wouldn't have to lay off by seniority. A skip is the ability to look at wage groups, say we're going to eliminate 1 person in them, and we want to protect these low on seniority, so skip him and start with next person. They want skips in each wage group.
- They want to add enterprise reporters to Group C. Margaret Kenny said she wanted a place to put reporters who are paid above wage scale.
- They want to end the practice of letting employees in editorial do freelance stories for The News. Lee VP Astrid Garcia was under the impression we received separate 1099s for that. We don't.
- They proposed moving Guild-covered employees to Lee health, dental, life plans and eligibility rules, beginning in 2025. That would reduce health care flex credits by 30% per person. Their health care plans are abysmal. All some variation of a high deductible plan, including their pro plan, which cost you a \$3,500 deductible before copays. Switching to the Lee healthcare plan would result in Guild members paying in some cases 48% of the cost of their premium. Currently they pay 9%.
- We are the only paper in the Lee chain that is not on the Lee Enterprises healthcare plan. St. Louis Guild members pay 35% of the cost of their healthcare premium.
- And they want to terminate the pension plan, to cash it out for all employees. Everyone would get lump sum or annuity based on what their actuary figures your pension is worth. More info to come on that. They would take the value of the pension and divide it among pensioners. Then the company has no pension liability after that.
- When offered buyout to former employees last year, their formula was what is your pension worth and how much would you get if you live 5 years. They used the 5 year certain.
- No proposal from management yet for term of contract or wages.

There was a discussion among the executive committee of the management proposal to terminate the pension.

Leiser: Management is saying the lump sum pension payment will be taxed as a bonus, at about 40%.

**Mobilization:**

Besecker: The mobilization committee has met twice already and tasks have been assigned to members.

Tan: Guild lanyards, T-shirts and polo shirts will be ordered soon.

There was discussion about actions related to Lee Enterprises' annual shareholders meeting Feb. 22.

**Guild General Membership Meeting Minutes: Feb. 16, 2024**

President Jon Harris updated Guild members on the proposals Lee Enterprises has made during the first bargaining session for our next contract.

The Guild presented our opening proposals today. At the next bargaining meeting we will present our counter-proposals responding to what management proposed.

Harris provides summary of Lee Enterprises' proposals (see *executive committee minutes for Feb. 12, 2024*)

Tomorrow we will meet with Lee Enterprises VP of Benefits Mark Hall because they want to move us to the Lee healthcare plan. He will answer questions about that.

Yesterday we had a presentation from Lee Enterprises about their pension termination proposal and what it means. Lee is looking to do this now because the pension plan is currently fully funded. They're concerned that the plan will become underfunded over time. They proposed a standard termination. Pension Guarantee Trust Fund regulators have to sign off on that. Lee would put management of the payments out to bid and an insurance company takes over it. By law, the insurance company has to make the same monthly payments for retirees. For anyone not collecting, you have a lump sum option. The other option for anyone not already collecting is an annuity option. The wild card is interest rates. October of every year is when the interest rate is set. Interest rate has to do a lot with how much you actually get. Our pension would not be federally protected by the Pension Guarantee Trust Fund if it is terminated. It would be protected by New York State up to \$500,000. If Guild members roll over the lump sum payment or receive an annuity, there would be no tax penalty.

Lee proposed switching our Guild to its healthcare plan that is provided to all other Lee papers. They have bronze, silver, gold and platinum plans. Bronze is the cheapest and it has a \$12,000 deductible. Their PPO plan is worse than our current high deductible plan. It has a \$3,500 deductible.

We see this proposal as a nonstarter.

**Mobilizing:**

Aaron Besecker: We're working on mobilization against the Lee proposals. Lee VP Astrid Garcia will be in Buffalo March 5-7 for all day bargaining.

Sandy Tan: Annual Lee shareholders meeting is next week. We're working on internal and external messaging.

We have samples of Guild shirts for order. All of the Guild lanyards have been distributed to DMs.

The Guild is making a proposal to TNG to cover about \$30,000 in mobilizing costs.