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Newsies — the real story behind the musical

A Disney stage show based on the boy paper sellers of 19th-century New York is coming to London. The historian Vincent DiGirolamo reveals the social history behind it



Mukeni Nel, Arcangelo Ciulla and Ross Dorrington in Newsies

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One can certainly learn about the French Revolution by reading Charles

Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* or Cromwell's England from Hillary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*. Their stage and screen adaptations may be equally instructive, not to say illuminating. But what can the Disney musical *Newsies*, opening next week at the Troubadour Wembley Park Theatre in London, reliably tell audiences about the real strike by New York City newsboys in 1899 or the historic mix of trade grievances, class resentments and generational solidarities that sparked and sustained it?

Like all previous productions of the 2012 Broadway hit, this new version is billed as “based on a true story”. Many of its characters did indeed haunt the alleys and avenues of Old New York — prominent figures such as the newspaper magnate Joseph Pulitzer (although not his rival William Randolph Hearst) as well as obscure participants like “Kid Blink” (the 18-year-old Italian-born Louis Balletti) and Dave Simons (renamed Jacobs in the play).

As trifling or improbable as the strike may seem, especially in relation to the monumental Gilded Age clashes of adult industrial workers seeking the eight-hour day, the first thing to note is that the newsboys’ dust-up actually happened. For two hot and humid weeks in the summer of 1899 thousands of disgruntled newspaper hawkers, mostly boys between the ages of 8 and 18, protested the 10 per cent price hike from 50¢ to 60¢ for a hundred papers. This was imposed on them during the Spanish-American War by the two largest-circulation newspapers in the nation, Hearst’s New York Evening Journal and Pulitzer’s World, both originators of the jingoistic yellow journalism that had stoked war fever.



Stonebridge recruiting station in 1898

Numbering at least 15,000, the newsboys of New York banded together in all five boroughs, followed by boys in New Jersey, Connecticut and Rhode Island. They pledged to stop selling the two papers — and prevent others from doing so — until the publishers reinstated the traditional wholesale price of two for a penny.

The other city dailies delighted in their competitors' troubles and covered the story as a "mock-epic struggle of dirty-faced Davids against twin Goliaths", in the words of the strike's first historian, David Nasaw. City editors dispatched reporters and illustrators to the combat zones, where they aided the strikers with their sympathetic coverage and by printing up their placards ("Help Us in Our Struggle"), issuing strike extras and, possibly, renting halls for their "monster meetings". The circulation of friendly newspapers boomed during the dispute while sales of the two boycotted ones dropped 40 to 60 per cent. Advertising revenue also plunged, according to memos sent to the reclusive Pulitzer on his yacht in Maine. The boys' revolt was no mere nuisance.

Indeed, as newspapers carried the story across the country, a kind of paediatric "strike bacillus" spread in its wake. Newsboys and bootblacks stopped work and demanded better terms from their own newspapers and bosses in Cincinnati, Ohio, Lexington, Kentucky, and Nashville, Tennessee. Telegraph messenger boys also walked out in New York, Cincinnati, Rochester, Syracuse, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Boston. Some feared the eruption of a children's general strike.

While seemingly an exceptional one-off event, the 1899 surge followed a long tradition of labour militancy in the news trade. As early as 1844, newsboys in Philadelphia passed a resolution objecting to the Public Ledger's pricing policy, claiming that it "violated the rights of man, in asking us poor boys with widowed mothers and desolated sisters to pay two cents for extras". In 1845, hawkers of the New York Mirror and Evening Express held an "indignation meeting" to denounce those newspapers' business practices, then paraded through the streets wearing "shocking bad hats" and carrying muslin banners calling for "Fair Play and No gouging!"



JG Brown depicted newsboys and bootblacks as rosy-cheeked ragamuffins thriving on the streets

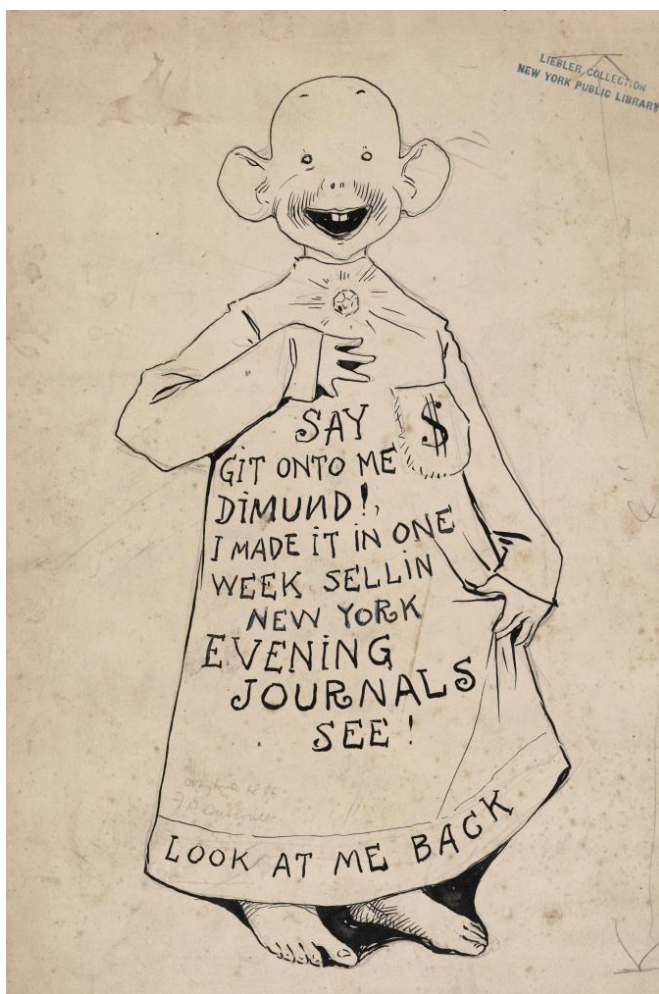
off. The great upheavals of railroad, steel and mine workers during these decades did much to heighten newsboys' awareness of their rights as labourers.

Most newsboy unions were ephemeral associations that vanished when the provoking issues were resolved, usually in favour of the newspaper owners. But some of these organisations endured and affiliated with local labour councils or national bodies such as the Knights of Labor, the American Federation of Labor and, in the early 1900s, the anarcho-syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World.

In 1863, during the Civil War, 50 newsboys supplying the Army of the Potomac struck in response to a military order restricting their number at the front. Their “mutiny” failed when General Joseph Hooker had them escorted from the lines. Detroit newsboys struck the following year over unrecorded grievances, but their action lasted only until suppertime.

More sustained and successful newsboy strikes occurred in Cincinnati, St. Louis, Cleveland, Detroit and Baltimore in the 1870s, and in Denver, Milwaukee, Chicago, San Antonio, Boston, Brooklyn and Manhattan in the 1880s. Most were sparked by economic grievances, but the firing of a favourite supplier or an order to wash up could set them

Ironically, the image of newsboys as “little merchants” who had more in common with Wall Street brokers than exploited wage earners, predominated during this period due to the rags-to-riches novels of Horatio Alger and the sentimental art of the Newcastle native JG Brown, who depicted newsboys and bootblacks as rosy-cheeked ragamuffins thriving on the streets. Newspapers also promoted the entrepreneurial spirit of newsboys in their human-interest stories and solicitations. “Git onto me dimund!” said Hearst’s Yellow Kid cartoon character, pointing to his enormous stickpin. “I made it in one week sellin’ New York Evening Journals See!”



Hearst’s Yellow Kid cartoon character

But the newsies of 1899 learned some of their own radical history from “Kid Blink”, who rose to remind the 2,000 strikers assembled in New Irving Hall on Broome Street (an event recreated in the musical) of their successful protest six years earlier. “We won in 1893 and will win in 1899,” he told the boys, “but stick together like plaster. Ain’t that ten cents worth as much to us as it is to Hearst and Pulitzer, who are millionaires? Well I guess it is. If they can’t spare it, how can we?” Billy, a Jersey City newsboy, expressed similar class feelings when he told a local reporter, “Wese uns has got ter stand by one another dese times, ’cause if we don’t sure’s hell we’ll git it in de neck from dem capitalists.”

The musical replicates the newsboys’ slang in the same comically exaggerated way in which contemporary reporters quoted them. Many characters also bear the colourful nicknames — Crutchy, Dutchy, Boots — that

amused readers and attested to the boys' fraternity and diversity. The strikers represented the full range of ages, ethnicities and abilities found in the trade, including a few African Americans, elderly women and girls. One Park Row "Joan of Arc" was credited with driving off two big strike breakers whom the boys had failed to subdue.

Reporters tended to describe the newsboys' skirmishes in slapstick fashion, but strike violence was no joke. Some adult "scabs" (strike breakers) hired by Hearst and Pulitzer wielded table legs and carried revolvers; one even stuck a loaded gun down Kid Blink's eloquent throat. The strikers played rough too. They armed themselves with horseshoes, baseball bats, barrel staves and wheel spokes. "Yer clubs ain't meant for toot'picks," Kid Blink told them. Two exuberant enforcers, Samuel Wolkinsky, 13, and John Armstrong, 14, were arrested for forcing a boy to swallow large portions of an extra he was carrying.

Anxious to break the strike, circulators asked Salvation Army lasses to sell the boycotted papers, but the women refused. Managers then tried to buy off strike leaders for \$300 to \$600 apiece. They appeared to succeed when Kid Blink and Dave Simons showed up on Park Row — the heart of the newspaper district — on July 26 with bundles of Worlds and Journals, saying they had negotiated a settlement. Kid Blink sported a new suit of clothes and unwisely flashed a roll of bills. The strike committee tried the pair for "high treason" and "low bribery". They escaped conviction, but were removed from office.

On July 27, the World and Journal offered to sell papers to the boys at 55¢ per hundred, but strike leaders rejected the compromise. Defections increased, however, and the strikers' resolve weakened further when the papers offered to accept the return of all unsold copies. The strike ended in New York on August 2 without a meeting or a vote and limped to a close a few days later in New Jersey. We might have gotten more, one newsie explained to a customer, but "de leaders was bought off".

While the strike did not result in the grand victory depicted in *Newsies*, it had lasting consequences for both sides. Hearst felt betrayed by his fellow publishers and withdrew from their association. He and Pulitzer fixed the price of their daily and Sunday offerings and instituted identical return policies. The newsboys' union continued under an adult president who advocated wearing union badges and affiliating with other labour

organisations. Their first action was a pledge not to sell copies of the once-supportive New York Sun until the paper took back its locked-out printers. A week later 200 newsboys brought up the rear of a solidarity parade, waving flags and carrying banners affirming support for their union brothers.

Reformers also started to pay more attention to the boys. In 1902 they formed the New York Child Labor Committee, which won passage of a 1903 law licensing newsies in New York City and Buffalo. The law established a minimum age (10 for boys, 16 for girls) and set a 10pm curfew for any vendor under 14.

None of these post-strike developments clutters the finale of *Newsies*, which nevertheless captures an authentic aspect of newsboy life in portraying them singing and dancing. Peddling papers was a kind of street theatre in which hawkers attracted customers with their cries, dress and antics. Whitey Dukenfield, for instance, honed his juggling skills with folded newspapers on the streets of Philadelphia in the early 1890s and became famous as the comedian WC Fields. More than a few of his peers followed similar paths. What's more, newsboy characters appeared in stage plays throughout the 19th-century and became the protagonists of such dramatic productions as *Newsboys of New York* (1851), *Newsboys' Ballet* (1867) and *The Newsboy Witness* (1895). Wembley Park's production of *Newsies* carries on this tradition in which singing, dancing, and striking were all part of the job.

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