

The Globe And Mail

Le Journal strike hits one-year mark

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French newspaper Le Journal de Québec is no stranger to feuds in its own backyard. A year ago, the tabloid was in a nasty fight with local icon Patrick Roy over its coverage of the former goalie and now junior hockey coach.

Since then, the Quebecor Inc. paper has been consumed by a different kind of spat.

When today's edition of Le Journal hits the streets, it will mark the one-year anniversary of a labour dispute that shows no signs of letting up.

It is believed to be the longest dispute in at least 25 years in Canada. And in the past 12 months, the disruption has spawned a mini newspaper war after the 120 locked out employees launched a rival publication, Media Matin.

The tabloid is a profitable operation and has been fattened to as many as 44 pages, from 24, to handle higher ad sales, said Robert Bellerose, spokesman for the Canadian Union of Public Employees.

Though it may not be churning out windfall profits, the results have been unexpected in an era when mainstay newspapers struggle to hold market share. "We are above break-even most of the time," Mr. Bellerose said of Media Matin "Part of it has been [selling] more advertising."

To mark the one-year anniversary, the paper will increase its print run to more than 70,000 copies today, from its regular circulation of 40,000, and will have at least 52 pages. By comparison, Le Journal's circulation is roughly 100,000.

However, the upstart paper hasn't shaken the company's position. Quebecor management has been publishing Le Journal throughout the dispute and said Media Matin has not hurt its business. "As far as we know it is not a major commercial impact [on Le Journal]," Quebecor spokesman Luc Lavoie said.

Aside from 15 days of talks in January, the two sides haven't held significant negotiations on a new contract. Quebecor maintains the newspaper model has changed and newsroom jobs must be more flexible to produce content for the Internet. The company also wants to increase the union's workweek from 32-hours to 37.5 hours.

"We don't think it's exaggerated what we are asking for," Mr. Lavoie said. "The business model changes and everyone involved has to adjust."

Le Journal's employees are concerned Quebecor just wants to slash costs and cut jobs. Quebecor got its

start in the newspaper business in the 1960s by taking advantage of newspaper strikes in Montreal and Quebec to launch Le Journal. The dispute is one of the longest in Canada.

"There are some, particularly in the 1950s and 60s and even 70s, that went on for longer than this that have never, in fact, ended," said Peter Murdoch, vice-president of media for the Communications, Energy & Paperworkers Union of Canada. "I'd say it's the longest dispute we've had in the past quarter century."

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