"We're relevant again!" Steven Rosenthal, political director of the AFL-CIO, crowed recently. And he's right. Unions are edging back into the news. Some argue that the white-collar press slowly abandoned labor, but on the other hand, it's been hard to justify coverage of a movement that wasn't moving.

Now that labor finally does seem to be going somewhere — shoving its way to a chair at the national table, where the fare, downsizing and stagnant wages, immigration and trade, is union meat — the press will surely follow. If labor's leaders deliver half of what they are promising in terms of new organizing, bargaining, and political efforts, there will be real stories to tell. How well will they be told?

If coverage of the biggest labor story to roll down the pike in a while is an indication, there is reason to worry. That story is the struggle inside our largest private-sector union, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters — the changing of the guard there and the effort to change the guard back, which will surface at the Teamster convention in Philadelphia in July and culminate in the big union's national election in November. A serious election campaign has been under way for quite a while now between the incumbent, Ron Carey, the reformer who swept into office in 1991, and James P. Hoffa, son of the man who helped make the Teamsters a national force and a national disgrace.

It's a real story. But not much reportorial energy has been devoted so far to figuring out what Carey has been doing for his five years as president or what the race between these two men actually means to Teamsters, to labor, and to the rest of working Americans, so unnerved these days by the complicated forces warping the world of work. Instead, it can be argued, we get sideshows.

The background of the Teamsters story is fairly well known: the union's major pension fund was a bank for organized crime, many of its locals were dominated by mobsters, and its culture was permeated by self-interest and sellouts. In an effort to finally cleanse the unions the federal government filed a giant civil RICO suit in 1988 and settled it the following year, and under its terms, the Teamsters were forced to choose leaders democratically instead of by the usual convention rubber stamp. In that first one-member-one-vote election, the victor was Carey, a man put forth in Steven Brill's groundbreaking 1978 book, The Teamsters, as the kind of leader who ought to be running the union. He quickly crossed swords with the old guard, and now, as his term comes to an end, his opponents are gathering around Hoffa, the son of the mighty icon who not-all-that-mysteriously disappeared in 1975.

Hoffa and Carey, at first glance, seem an unlikely pair of warriors. Carey looks like the slightly nervous UPS driver that he once was, "a slight, gray man who greases his hair and wears ill-cut suits," as New York magazine put it. Fiery before a labor crowd, he seems edgy and distrustful around the press.

Hoffa is a pudgy Michigan labor lawyer who, like Newt Gingrich, says he'll move power away from Washington to the grass roots. He's polished on TV and unafraid to use his main claim to fame: "Hi, I'm Jimmy Hoffa," he says, over and over again at truck barns and warehouses across the land.

The name Hoffa is electric, of course, conjuring conflicting emotions in labor's collective memory, and sparking some people-page coverage on TV. In 1994, after the younger Hoffa had begun his long run for the presidency of the Teamsters, the Today show's Jamie Gangel started her

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ing the language and message of dissidents, and being open with the media, we have bluntly the more cynical long-time reporters — but they will never be on our side. But we are winning over the less experienced reporters through one-on-one discussions and by being a source of information.

Why the anti-Carey forces might want to avoid what remains of the labor press seems fairly clear: on the whole, they seem to respect Ron Carey. One talks of him as a “guy who’s been eating tuna sandwiches at his desk for twenty years,” who it is hard to imagine as corrupt, given a long record that would seem to indicate the opposite. Carey, says another, has been “helping people all his life.” A third casually refers to Hoffa’s people as the “forces of darkness.” Is this a kind of bias, or is it a reflection of experience and knowledge? A bit of both?

In any event, labor writers tended to handle the Carey “scandals” skeptically, although to different degrees. Some didn’t report them at all; others did, but tried to put the charges in context. Stephen Franklin, who covers labor for the Chicago Tribune, made clear in his coverage of the real estate charges that they had come up “in the middle of a mud-slinging campaign. I tried to find out where the allegations came from. When I pretty much figured out that the stuff was coming out of Mike Maroney and the Michigan LaRouche folks, I steered clear.”

The “Michigan LaRouche folks” are George Geller and Richard Leebove, and if Maroney is ground zero of the Carey scandals, Leebove and Geller are the shock waves, energetically pushing Maroney’s information throughout the press. Both work for the Michigan Teamster who hired James Hoffa as a local union official in order to make him eligible to run for Teamster president. But it’s their backgrounds that have given labor reporters pause. Both men are former acolytes of Lyndon LaRouche, the nutty fascist (LaRouche once wrote that Jimmy Hoffa’s death was ordered by “the international Zionist community”), and although both portray this period as something from their misguided youth, both were deeply involved. Leebove, now a public relations consultant, and Geller, an attorney, both worked for a LaRouche newspaper, for example, that defended the some of labor’s worst leaders. “Leebove’s specialty had always been the heavy-handed smear,” Dennis King wrote in “Lyndon LaRouche and the New American Fascism,” his 1989 exposé of LaRouche and his followers. Post-LaRouche, in the 1980s, Leebove and Geller both did work for something called BLAST, the Brotherhood of Loyal and Strong Teamsters, which functioned as a goon squad to intimidate Teamsters for a Democratic Union, a reform group. Several of the complaints to the IRB were made by Geller, and the IRB found that none had merit.

“Out of fairness, you’ve got to look at these labor writers,” Leebove says. “Just because somebody’s past doesn’t meet their litmus test, should that deny them the opportunity to present factual stories?” Indeed, that Geller and Leebove were pushing Carey scandals was reason enough, for a few labor reporters, to avoid them. “They tried to sell me this MAN BUYS CONDO story; they sent me all the stuff,” says Ted Reed, who covers labor for The Miami Herald. “I knew what it was — a guy trying to discredit Ron Carey. I could have done it, because the real estate was in Florida. But what was the story? MAN BUYS CONDO IN FLORIDA.”

Swoboda of The Washington Post did cover the real-estate story and began his piece on it this way: “For a man of the people, Teamsters President Ron Carey seems to own a lot of real estate.” But while Franklin put the story in a political context, Swoboda tried to put it in the context of his own values.

“I didn’t find a shred of anything illegal or immoral, or anything that you or I wouldn’t do,” he says. “In the 1980s, it was not unheard of to invest in real estate. If you net it all out, one sale against the other, the repurchases and so forth, it’s not a lot of money, not something that makes you want to reconvene the Watergate grand jury. You have to make some judgment of faith, I suppose.”

There may be more people writing about general workplace issues — benefits, health coverage, pay, race and gender on the job — than ever, particularly since stagnant wages and spreading layoffs have finally entered the national debate. Business Week’s Shepard, for example, points to “very early covers on wages, on inequality of income,” in his magazine.

What often gets left out, however, is unions, which are still the only voice for American workers, and which have been proving lately that they aren’t yet dead. The excitement of a new Jimmy Hoffa gets lots of air and ink. The journalistic and official investigations into Carey generate headlines and news reports and inconclusive smoke all across the country.

What’s harder to find are the stories about the center ring: What’s Carey’s record? What goals has he reached, and where has he fallen short? Has he weakened and divested the union or is he merely trying to divide the old guard from their powers and perks? What’s happened in all those local unions he says he’s cleaned up? Are the Teamster reformers sticking with him? Has Carey run the union’s finances down, as Hoffa claims, or has he taken steps to shore up a shaky money situation that the old guard left behind? How has he done with the Teamsters’ major contracts, and all the difficult issues that his members face these days? What is Jimmy Hoffa’s program and who are his people? Is he a representative of local union control against the top-down elitists, as he contends, or a stooge for the worst that American unionism has to offer, as Carey’s people maintain? How do both sides finance their campaigns? Will the Hoffa forces be successful at stripping Carey of many of his powers at the coming convention, as many expect them to do?

And, on another level, what are we in the press doing to help all the cops and nurses and guards and brewers and bakers and drivers and the rest of the working Teamsters make a decision in November, when they get their second chance in history to pick a leader?