

## Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

### Editor sees threat to freedom of press

The national president of the 25,000-member Society of Professional Journalists went on record at a public press conference here April 28 calling for an independent investigation into the charges that the government violated the First, Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Amendments to the Constitution in shutting down two publications because of their alleged links to Democratic presidential candidate Lyndon LaRouche.

Robert Wills, president of the Society and editor of the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, called for an investigation into the circumstances surrounding the government's actions to force the publishers of *New Solidarity*, a twice-weekly newspaper with a circulation of 160,000, and *Fusion*, a bi-monthly scientific journal, into involuntary bankruptcy earlier in the month.

Wills was speaking at a press conference at the National Press Club on the subject of "the importance of a free press" when he was asked to comment on the government's actions by this reporter.

The press conference was sponsored jointly by the Society for Professional Journalists and the Advertising Council, announcing a new national ad campaign on the importance of a free press in America. Present with Wills were Robert Keim, national

president of the Ad Council, and John Quinn, editor of *USA Today* newspaper. Twenty journalists and three TV crews made up the audience.

Following a presentation of the newspaper, radio, and TV ads slated for their campaign, and a brief paean to a free press by Quinn (who referred to his own newspaper as "giving new depth to the meaning of shallow"), I asked Quinn to comment on a "real case." I described how the U.S. Attorney Henry Hudson had gotten an *ex parte* hearing before a bankruptcy judge and an order for involuntary bankruptcy against the publishers, based on allegedly unpaid debts of the allegedly LaRouche-linked companies to the government, which are in fact still under appeal in court.

The result of the action, I noted, was the swift shut-down of the two publications, despite the fact that there has not been a single conviction for a single criminal action with regard to anyone associated with the organizations, or LaRouche himself, for that matter. The first move by the temporary trustees assigned by the courts was to order the immediate termination of the publications.

Quinn could hardly brush off the question after the speech he had just given. He said, "I can only speak for myself, but I think that an investigation of this would be in order. As for a remedy, that would depend on the outcome of an investigation."

Wills interjected: "I can speak on behalf of the Society for Professional Journalists, and say that I think this should be investigated. We have a Freedom of Information Committee set up for just such purposes and its chairman is in this room. We also have a legal defense fund."

In a nervous attempt to get the subject of the press conference back on its original track, Keim said, "It is cases just such as this that our advertising

campaign on behalf of a free press has been developed to assist."

The chairman of the SPJ's legal defense fund, Peter Prichard, approached me right after the briefing for further information on the case. I was later told by a representative of Campaigner Publications, which published *New Solidarity*, that Prichard told him the size of its legal defense fund is very small, but asked to have a formal request for a review of the case mailed to him.

The fact that the SPJ's legal defense fund has only a few dollars in it is a clue that they haven't been confronted with a serious fight to protect a free press in some time.

### Visible decline of a free press

The freedom of the American press has eroded slowly but surely. Its most evident form lies in the dramatic decline in the number of daily newspapers available to the public. Twenty-five years ago, the average large American city had three or four dailies. Some had five or even six dailies. Today, a city is lucky to have two. Most, including the nation's capital (except for the limited-circulation Moonie paper), have only one. Most of those monopoly papers, including those in the thousands of smaller towns in America, are owned by a handful of chains.

This is no accident. The annual reports of the New York Council on Foreign Relations, the arm of the British Round Table's efforts to "re-colonize" America, for years were appended with a detailed profile of every daily newspaper in the United States, including the size of its circulation and its political persuasion. This profiling was obviously for the purpose of eventually controlling this medium, and their success has been staggering.