



CitySprint: A multinational falls

By Aaron Hackett, Former
CitySprint Messenger
(1999-2001)

Bringing to mind a besieged colonial power fleeing an unruly outpost, on Friday, July 13, it was announced that San Francisco DMS/CitySprint had expired. Undermined by the emergence of “indie” companies, slapped around by wildcat strikes, and threatened with incipient unionization, CitySprint hierarchs decided to pull up stakes and get the fuck out. Without warning, at 1:40 PM

CitySprint messengers were told to pick up our final check on Monday and have a nice life. And that was it.

The story of CitySprint is the story of a multinational corporation with grandiose designs to take over an industry that it saw as comprised of anachronistic imbeciles, and, in the process, meeting unrelenting hostility and opposition.

CitySprint, first known simply as DMS/RMS, came onto the San Francisco messenger scene in 1997 with much fanfare, buying up courier firms left



photo by Pico Van Houtryve/Examiner

CitySprint messengers get their final checks July 16.

and right. By 1998, it had acquired eight messenger firms in San Francisco alone, and had centers in approximately 30 cities around the world. Now, saddled with massive debt and in hock to the bank, only two centers remain open.

It wasn't supposed to work out this way. With its vaunted software and “new economy” ethos, DMS/RMS promised to revolutionize the messenger industry. Through brilliant self-promotion its stock value

continued on p. 4

Become a Courier Disaster Technician (CDT) for Free!

The San Francisco Fire Department provides Neighborhood Emergency Response Team (NERT) classes at no cost. The goal of this program is to help the citizens of San Francisco to be self sufficient in a major disaster by developing multi-functioning teams cross trained in basic emergency skills. Through this program individuals will learn hands on disaster skills that will help them as members of an

continued on p. 2

LATE NEWS

On Tuesday, August 7, a woman cyclist was killed near the freeway entrance at South Van Ness. The driver was not cited. She was hit so badly that she has not yet been identified as this issue goes to press. The area near the South Van Ness freeway entrance is known to be a dangerous one for cyclist, pedestrians and even motorists. This is yet another example of the Autocratic system killing someone. In this country alone, over 40,000 people each year are murdered by this system.

Disaster techs

continued from p.1

emergency response team and as leaders directing untrained volunteers during an emergency, and allowing them to act independently or as an adjunct to City emergency services.

Once messengers have completed NERT and First Aid Training, patches will be distributed identifying participants as trained courier disaster technicians. Join us, as we train in earthquake awareness, disaster medicine, light search and rescue, and team organization.

Our intimate knowledge of the street and our endurance on our fast sturdy bikes could make us a vital part of the City's emergency plans with the right training. We are working with the Red Cross to coordinate specialized first aid classes that look at the unique abilities of messengers.

Ideas and input are welcome. Spread the word that I'm on the lookout for patch designs. Any and all will be considered. You can e-mail me at: hungrykitty52@yahoo.com to get more info on Messenger/NERT training and to sign up. You can also visit www.nertnews for more info on the NERT program and to find out about ongoing neighborhood classes.

—by **Serenity Enriquez**
415-232-2870 (pager)

Editor's Note: Serenity's idea is so obvious it's obviously good and has made some folks wonder why it hasn't been implemented already. Actually there were some attempts in the past but nothing as serious as what Serenity's got goin' on. And there were some contributions by individual SF messengers in the 1989 quake but nothing on a mass scale that we're capable of. Cyclists also came through after the massive Kyoto quake in Japan about 10 years ago. Serenity's idea has real potential and we should try to match her energy on it.—HW

MESSENGER WISDOM

“Bike Messengering is a competitive team sport. You compete against members of your own team.”

—*Paul Van Dryk, Western*

“Who would you rather have as your President?: an ex-crackhead or a guy who cheats on his wife? In one case at least the hormones are still working; in the other case the damage has already been done.”

—*John Blackwell, Pro*

“We messenger company owners are a suspicious and cowardly lot.”

—*Anonymous*

Know an example of Messenger Wisdom?

Send it to:

Cognition c/o H. Williams

Box 26650/ SF, CA 94126

or to: howardx@pacbell.net

Free trade riddle:

What does FTAA stand for?

answer on page 8

Thank you to the SF Call and the Bay Guardian for helping us get our news box back!

Webvan & CitySprint: Gone, Not Forgotten

The two photos in this issue tell so much of the story: the people who work hard at building a company are the ones hit hardest when their bosses screw things up. Earlier this summer Webvan and then on Friday the 13th of July, CitySprint's SF and LA branches joined Kozmo.com as failed innovators in the same day delivery industry.

Employees of Webvan, a US corporation, received severance pay. In the case of the multinational CitySprint, workers were told of the branch's demise literally at the last minute. Their final paychecks were dated several days after the company's closure and no severance pay, once again in violation of state and federal laws. Fortunately the CitySprint messengers had sought union recognition from the ILWU. The ILWU will file for court action to compel CitySprint to pay 60 days' severance pay for the multinational's flagrant disregard for the national business closing law (a.k.a. WARN).

All three corporations brought much needed new thought to our ancient and honorable profession. CitySprint introduced free call while Webvan and Kozmo expanded the Messenger Industry concept of delivering anything to anybody anywhere to unprecedented levels.

In the case of free call, No BS, Jetset and other Messenger services have picked up this idea and carried it on at their companies. Messengers at those places like free call, which will probably have a secure niche in the industry for as long as radios are used in dispatching. Free call will have its critics but it certainly cuts down on the abusive style Messengers encounter from some dispatchers in various parts of Western civilization. However, free call let a genie out of the bottle. By giving Messengers more decision making power to improve productivity but not the gains from that productivity (as shown by Joel Metz' analysis of the UPG), DMS/Ciysprint bosses sowed the seeds

of a labor discontent that would only get worse when they chose to fight their own workers rather than simply respect their rights. DMS/CitySprint was doomed the day they brought in the Littler Men outsiders with their anti-union policies.

The innovations by the two Internet services—Webvan and Kozmo—had truly revolutionary potential for enlarging both the income and the social impact of the Messenger Industry. By offering to have professional drivers and bikers do what millions do in privately owned cars, Webvan and Kozmo could have helped make the air cleaner AND the streets safer. One Webvan or Kozmo vehicle driven by a professional would make one trip to the supermarket and then drop off deliveries to perhaps a dozen clients along a route. This would be instead of those 12 customers getting into their 12 cars and making 12 trips to the supermarket. And according to a recent *Mercury News* article (November 24, 2000) 77% of

California's non-professional drivers have failed their DMV drivers test at least once. So it's reasonable to estimate that 9 of those 12 drivers do not know what the #>*&! they're doing. Messenger companies doing such work would cut down unnecessary auto trips and thus be able to decrease air pollution and auto accidents. If there was ever a case for the government subsidizing a business this would be it (especially if they paid decently—something Kozmo and Webvan could've been better at). As with CitySprint, the innovations by themselves weren't enough. Respecting the employees' right to represent themselves was a step the faux hip Internet bosses couldn't bring themselves to take.

Something else all three companies had in common was that their stock was publicly traded. And this attempt to join innovation with the detached ownership that characterizes publicly traded companies proved to be an unwieldy fit. As we've seen, innovation in the Messenger Industry usually comes from Messengers—either in



photo by Mark Costantini/The Chronicle

WebVan driver contemplates the end.

continued on p. 7

CitySprint

continued from p.1

in the early days went for over \$ 30 a share. However, its arsenal of nifty technology and cutesy business theorems never proved to increase productivity significantly, and certainly not enough to counteract the almost complete lack of loyalty that its yuppie arrogance engendered.

What stoked resentment most of all was the implementation of the Universal Pay Grid (UPG), which standardized and in many cases dramatically decreased messenger pay-outs at the newly minted “brands”. The UPG confirmed suspicions that many had and coalesced anger against the corporate bosses. Indeed, from very early on there was a feeling among many messengers at DMS/RMS that a collective fight-back was in order.

* * *

As alluded to above, DMS/RMS/CitySprint (which from here on I’ll refer to as CS) was the site of much contestation in its short stay in San Francisco. In what follows, I’ll discuss the fight that has been waged and try to draw out, what, in my view, is relevant to the on-going struggle for more power and better conditions for SF messengers. If it seems disjointed, that in part is due to the disjointed nature of events in the past several years.

When I began working for CS in February 1999 (after biking for Speedway between ‘93-’95 and Silver Bullet ‘96-98) there was an official union drive under way. Of approximately 45 bike and walking messengers, all felt that the UPG, as constituted, was a scam and mistrust of management ran high. The drivers weren’t as united but there was discontent in their ranks as well. Being new on the scene I was inclined at first to mainly observe and get a feel for the situation. A high percentage of the bikers and walkers had signed union cards and ILWU stickers were a fairly common sight. It seemed clear that given our numbers, and the high degree of dissatisfaction, that conditions were ripe for a strike action for better pay-outs. I signed a union card because I saw no particular harm in doing so, but I was concerned that strict adherence to union protocols—in particular, the slow-as-molasses government run union recognition process—would fail to effectively tap the anger that existed. **In** mid-March of ‘99 messengers on the board I worked on walked off the job in

protest of the termination of a pro-union fellow messenger and management re-instated him after two hours. This gave us a taste of our power, but it proved to be the only time in all of ‘99 that messengers at CS took action in support of a specific demand.

Over and over again I found that, far from galvanizing activity that would enable us to make demands from a position of strength, the union drive was instead used as a reason to be patient. While many messengers were ready to rock-and-roll, there were always enough whom argued that we should be reasonable and wait for the company to “go union”. Implicit in this position—which was usually articulated by the most vocally pro-union messengers—was the false assumption that gaining recognition obligates the bosses to give shit up, when, in fact, it simply requires them to enter negotiations. A fight still must be waged.

For as long as the UPG had existed messengers had “demanded” that it be abolished or radically improved. But without action—or at least a threat of action—a demand is a request to be ignored. And if a demand without action is silly, an action without a demand is equally so. Which brings us to the Tax Day Strike of 1999.

The Tax Day strike—which was a somewhat successful but strangely incoherent attempt at an industry-wide action—was honored by virtually all CS bikers and walkers, but, in accordance with union strategy, no demands were made. The effect of the strike was to wave a red flag in management’s face and in the weeks and months that followed it kicked its repressive strategy into effect. The notorious “rookie” B4 board was concocted that operated via a separate radio system and tags were diverted to it from other boards. But instead of provoking a collective response this and other management crap produced fatigue and a general weariness with waiting for the union to come in and “fix” the situation. Many began to feel that CS wasn’t worth the effort—which, of course, suited management fine. Messengers quit in droves, and by Summer ‘99, for all intents and purposes, the union drive was dead.

* * *

It needs to be emphasized that the laws that grant a formal right to unionize, and the body that governs those laws—the NLRB—were designed to temper inevitable conflict between bosses and work-

ers by directing discontent onto regulated and legalistic terrain. While superficially neutral these laws serve the employers interests by shoehorning workers into predictable modes of activity and dictating the pace and scope of our actions.

Efforts to streamline the recognition process as some unionists have proposed would certainly help. But the bottom line is that with or without recognition, as workers we are most powerful when we are unified and prepared to act on our own terms. And bosses can and will flout the minimal protections they provide knowing that whatever punishment, if any, levied by the courts will be enacted so far down the line as to make violations well worth it.

The fact is that while the union had a breadth of generic support among CS messengers in the first half of '99, hatred for management and its policies was always more widespread and felt with considerably more intensity. Anti-management sentiment, in other words, was always far more pronounced than pro-union sentiment. However, the union strategy carried the day and, in effect, channeled discontent away from launching an effective fight against management.

As one of a handful of masochists who worked in the first half of '99 and didn't quit, I continued to harbor the belief that a big strike was possible. By the end of the Summer conditions for bikes and walkers were worse than ever. The B4 riders were treated like absolute shit, many making about \$7/hour and the B1 board was hardly better. The B3 board, which I was on, was treated the best but we had to work like dogs for our money. And conditions for most in-town drivers were abysmal. (The "indie" companies had stripped many of the cherry accounts -- the ones that did lots of rush work and had easy picks and drops -- leaving a higher proportion of more onerous, low-paying work for us.)

While B3'ers were lucky to have a dispatcher, Greg Rodich, who didn't take any shit from his "superiors" (in fact they were scared of him!) and looked out for our interests as best he could, the rest of the SF based dispatchers were full-fledged management goons. The level of abuse and condescension was unbelievable. In meetings that were held starting in September, and attended mostly by new messengers, people were highly receptive to the idea of slapping management silly. One of those "rookie" messengers was Natasha, who was to become totally committed, like myself, to doing just that.

In the months that followed, a game-plan was devised that didn't rely on the good faith of the bosses, nor on the incremental approach of institutionalized procedures. It was all about gathering our forces and attacking. On January 12, 2000, the strike hit. Of 38 bike and walking messengers on the pay-roll all but one took part. A sizeable contingent of drivers from the "in-town" board walked off the job as did a smattering of regional messengers. We presented our demands to management at 10AM and announced that we were on strike. We demanded everything we could think of demanding. The look on our bosses faces was alone worth the effort. They pleaded with us to go back to work, saying that we were hurting the clients and that they felt our pain. When that failed we were told that the VP of Operations was being flown out from New York to meet with us.

The wildcat strike lasted five days, and while a good portion of the drivers stayed out only two days (and went back to work going slow in many cases), not one of the bikes or walkers went back during that time. In the marathon talks between management and strikers CS bosses promised that they would quickly attend to the many issues we raised. After five days we went back to work proclaiming that shit better shape up or we'd hit them again. To that VP Patrick Gallagher simply stated: "We believe you."

While the strike was no picnic (and included an ugly brawl with non-striking drivers on the fourth day in which Howard Williams got his jaw broken when assaulted from behind by a strikebreaker), it demonstrated our power in a manner that won us big concessions in the months that followed. Indeed, the power we amassed operated as a threat that hung over San Francisco CS bosses until its dying day. Until the end we could threaten more "turmoil" and they would back-off. What wasn't fully apparent to me at the time of the strike was the degree to which the strike made threats in the future credible, and it was those threats that won us concessions. If we had put our guard down in the weeks and months that followed -- which we didn't -- the lying bastards would have given up little or nothing.

Immediately after the strike ended, management abolished the B4 board, integrating those messengers onto the same radio, and they were paid retroactively for rip-offs they were subject to prior to the strike, quite a few receiving checks for around \$200. Rainy day pay was implemented totalling \$40 a week

continued on p. 6

CitySprint

continued from p. 5

December through March for all bike and walking messengers. When the first installment wasn't in our checks as promised bikers walked off the job and were paid in cash to go back to work! The unity that produced our victories in turn produced more unity, much to management's displeasure. When a messenger who participated in the strike was fired, ten messengers went to the office the next work-day and got his job back. Little actions like that continued at CS and their success was a cause and effect of bigger successes, keeping the bosses in check.

The most significant victory of all was a big, albeit uneven, raise in the UPG. Long bike and in-town driver work got a hike of about 15-20%, while downtown bike and walker tags saw, quite literally, a 60-70% increase. No two hour tag paid less than \$3 and no one hour less than \$3.60, made CitySprint workers, tag for tag some of the best paid commissioned messengers in the City, having previously been some of the worst paid.

* * *

It would be nice to end on that uncomplicated note, but of course, CitySprint has gone the way of the Dodo Bird, and the reasons for its demise need to be quickly addressed. CitySprint Corp. is in massive debt to the bank and has been closing down most of its centers for the past year or so. San Francisco is an extremely lucrative market, making SF CitySprint profitable despite all the turmoil in the past couple of years, and the bank had been trying to find a buyer. While the union drive, on the ground at least, had dissolved, the ILWU last year won card-check neutrality as part of a settlement of a Wages and Hour violation law-suit brought against CS.

In addition to the card check neutrality agreement, CS also had to pay damages to messenger plaintiffs for illegal pay practices. Card-check neutrality allows the union to gain recognition by simply getting 51% of the workforce to sign a card, dispensing with the whole albatross of an election. The deadline for amassing the requisite number of cards was July 5.

On July 3rd the ILWU notified CS that it had a majority. Natasha and I, despite fundamental differences with the union's legalistic

approach, decided to push for our fellow messengers to sign cards. It was a difficult decision, but we felt that so long as messengers remained unified and prepared to act collectively, there could be benefits in gaining formal recognition. We viewed it as a tactical move—and certainly not the end-all and be-all—which could possibly bring larger numbers of vehicle messengers into future actions. After a lengthy discussion, all the messengers in attendance—except for one respected co-worker who was down with the January strike but couldn't stomach signing a card—decided to vote as a block. Our plan was not to be passively absorbed into the union fold, but instead, to avail ourselves of the advantages of recognition while broadening our numbers for actions that we believed would quite possibly mean going outside the established union methods. Due to the successful wildcat actions of the past couple years, I believe that CS messengers would have been in a strong position going into contract negotiations. It would have been interesting and certainly nothing any capitalist would want to face.

EPILOGUE

The following statement was being circulated when CS announced its end. At that point 17 bikers, 5 drivers and 4 walkers had signed and it was meant as a general expression of our intent to continue fighting on our own terms, whether the union vote won or lost. It should be noted that a couple of the messengers who signed this statement did not sign a union card:

“The undersigned CitySprint messengers are committed to carrying on the spirit of the DMS/CS wildcat strike of January 2000. We seek to defend and expand upon the gains of that action. With or without union recognition and a contractual agreement we believe we are strongest when prepared to assert our collective power. No contract is better than a bad contract and only one that codifies real gains and increases our power on the job will meet our approval.”

Opinions in the previous article including assessments of the ILWU's strategy and effectiveness are those of the author and not necessarily those of the SFBMA or Cognition's staff. That said, Aaron has offered some sincere and constructive criticism that which we should all consider.

Coalition of Concerned Medical Professionals

On 12 April SFBMA hosted two speakers from the Coalition of Concerned Medical Professionals (CCMP). Michael Ramirez, CCMP Board of Directors member, spoke of CCMP's history of victories fighting for comprehensive health care for low-income workers and explained CCMP's method of all-volunteer organizing and community support. CCMP takes no government funding, and accepts no funding that would interfere with serving the true interests of low-income workers and the poor. Thelma Brown, RN, spoke of CCMP's medical benefit program and the need for more volunteers to expand these benefits. The article below is a reprint from CCMP's March 2001 newsletter, Vital Signs. Following that is a general description of the CCMP program.

* * *

CCMP's medical benefit program saves lives daily. Here is an example. Dr. Jim Eichel, CCMP's Medical Director saw a 24 year old male patient at a CCMP General Medical Session this February and took immediate action, consulting a specialist by phone after lab results showed the man to be suffering from liver failure. The consulting gastroenterologist directed a liver treatment program within the next ten days, or the man would suffer definite life-threatening medical complications. Indigent, and lacking a primary care physician, the man had not sought follow-up care for liver function tests done earlier in the year, until he heard of CCMP's free-of-charge program. Only tenacious advocacy by CCMP volunteer medical advocates made the difference between the patient obtaining timely liver treatment or a county clinic appointment three months into the future. The advocacy proved essential to getting medical coverage for the patient, under an "indigent adult program," as California's Medi-Cal coverage does not apply to single adults until they are in a medical emergency situation, a "catch 22" according to the Medi-Cal social worker at the county hospital.

* * *

CCMP stands as the alternative for medical professionals and others to donate their time and skills to work with the entire community in a self-help program to obtain adequate food, heat, housing or a job—resources that guard against health problems afflicting the poor—as well

as direct medical care. Without a cent of government funding or a single paid employee, CCMP has demonstrated health care "crisis" in our community can be avoided through a comprehensive approach to health care regardless of ability to pay. Volunteers are urgently needed to reach that growing number who fall through the cracks, finding no other source of accessible care, and to fight for comprehensive care for low-income workers. To find out more about CCMP's medical advocate training program and how you can help, call Jim at (510) 436-8020.

—by Jim DeGon

Gone but not forgotten

continued from p. 3

"indy" companies started from scratch or from collective action. Using motor vehicles in the Messenger Industry to replace many trips by privately owned autos is a worthwhile -- perhaps noble -- endeavor. But the real decision making powers to implement such an ambitious project should belong to those who know best how to do it: the Messengers. This is true practically as it is obviously morally true. Giving the decision making power and the profits to a bunch of stock speculators proved to be counter-productive and ultimately unsuccessful.

The failure of these three innovative corporations in the same day marketplace is regretful. Many people lost their jobs and the innovations introduced by these companies deserve to be given real chances. But let's not kid ourselves -- real innovation in the Messenger industry will only occur when Messengers gain industry-wide power and raise standards and tag prices. In that respect our industry is a microcosm and a future indicator of the entire economy and society of 21st Century America. Either the folks who do the work gain our rights or everybody can look forward to more failed companies and unemployed people.

—by Howard Williams, Speedway



Reasons for Wearing Your Helmet Can Come Falling Out of the Sky !

So there I was on a July afternoon, riding north along Polk Street, between Post and Sutter, minding my own business when suddenly WHAM!—I get slammed in the forehead by a pigeon! The impact was hard and actually knocked my noggin back a few inches. But luckily I wasn't hurt because I was wearing my helmet ! Unfortunately the pigeon died. Why ? Probably because it WASN'T wearing a helmet.

—by Howard Williams, Speedway

Answer to free trade riddle:

from page 2...

FTAA stands for “fuck the average American”!

DISCOUNTS for SFBMA Members available at the following places:

Patronize these friendly establishments! And look for *Cognition* at these hot spots!

The following bike shops give 10% discount on parts to SFBMA members.

- ◆ Foxy Flyer Bike Shop, 3330 Steiner, phone # 674-1910
- ◆ Big Swingin' Cycles, 1122 Taraval, phone # 661-2462 (also 10% discount on labor)
- ◆ Road Rage Bike Rental and Repair, 1063 Folsom, phone # 255-1351 (also 15% discount on labor)

Freewheels and Cycle Sports in Oakland also offer SFBMA discounts.

- ◆ The Sports Basement, 1301 6th St., phone # 437-1415

And Cassidy's Bar, 1145 Folsom, phone # 241-9990—\$2 beer specials M-F, 6-8pm

Next SFBMA meeting

Thursday, Sept. 13

7 p.m.

@ Local 6, 255 9th St., SF

RESULTS

from the 5th annual
Mountain Lion race,
July 22, 2001:

1st - Clive, 56:59. Awesome fast time on a tough course. Special thanks to Clive and VeloSport of Berkeley for donating some great prizes.

2nd - Super Mike, 57:06. Still the leader of the points series but he can be beaten!

3rd - Brandon, 1:01:00.

4th - Ginger, 1:03:40.

5th - Erik Z, 1:19:58.

6th - Dylan, 1:25:50.

7th/1st Veteran - Howard, 1:31:40.

8th/Best Dressed Guy - Jim, 1:40:20.

9th/1st Woman - Bridgett, 1:40:45

10th - Mike Eno, 1:46:20

11th - Erik, 2:16:00. Lost his manifest...kind of a dnf but he did make it back to the horseshoe pits.

12th/Best Dressed overall/officially DFL - Maria, 2:51:00

***In the next Cognition:
EMWC story and results!***