Pattern for Partnership: Putting Labor Racketeering on the Nation’s Agenda in the Late 1950s.
A Proposal for the Right and Labor Conference: David Witwer, Penn State Harrisburg

“In a society as complex as the U.S., it takes more than one man, or one newspaper, or one committee to focus the national attention on a serious problem.” Time magazine offered that observation in May 1957, in an article entitled, “Pattern for Partnership.” The story profiled a series of hearings by the Senate’s Select Committee on Improper Activities in the Labor or Management Field, a group better known as the McClellan Committee (1957-1959). In reporting the revelations of those hearings, Time was struck by the cooperative efforts of reporters and congressional investigators, which lay behind the news. “While the U.S. Senate's McClellan committee has produced the national headlines on labor racketeering, it was vigilant newsmen, from Des Moines to Portland, Ore. and back to Scranton, Pa., who sparked the Senate investigation and provided the scattered local fragments that fell into a nationwide kaleidoscope of corruption and violence.”

Thanks to such revelations, labor racketeering became an important issue in the late 1950s, one with serious political ramifications for the union movement. As Time had noted, however, there was a significant story behind that story. The process by which this issue gained such prominence reflected both the influence of the news media and the cooperative relationship between journalists, political leaders, and congressional investigators. This episode revealed the ways in which strategic alliances between journalists and politicians can shape the news and shift the nation’s political agenda. In this case it was a shift very much to the benefit of anti-union forces, as news coverage of the McClellan Committee hearings produced what one news article in May 1957 described as a “cloud of suspicion of corruption and racketeering [that] hovered over some elements in labor.” Or, as a top official in the AFL-CIO explained the matter to the Los Angeles Times, two week’s later, “Exposures before the McClellan committee on racketeering in the Teamsters Union forced the rest of organized labor into the enormous task of overcoming the public’s anti-union reactions.”

This paper will focus on the story behind the story of the hearings that took place in April 1957 in which the McClellan Committee probed union “goon squad” violence in Scranton,
Pennsylvania. On the eve of those hearings, the committee’s chief counsel, Robert F. Kennedy, explained, “Scranton will be spotlighted in this sequence of the inquiry because the Committee regards conditions there as disturbingly typical of those prevailing in a number of other cities.” The resulting revelations received front page coverage in major metropolitan daily newspapers from New York to Los Angeles, as well as the weekly news magazines, including a glossy picture story in *Life* magazine. That coverage reflected a consistent effort by the McClellan Committee to work with the news media, both in choosing investigative targets and in shaping the angle of the news coverage. This paper will use the Scranton hearings to profile that cooperative effort and the impact that it had.