

# After the Strike:

## *The Lasting Impact of Hiring Striker Replacements*

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**D**uring the 1980s, several once-union-friendly companies took an uncharacteristically aggressive approach to collective bargaining: they demand major concessions and dared the unions to go on strike.<sup>1</sup> Behind the new strategy was the willingness, perhaps even the desire, to respond to a strike by hiring permanent replacement workers. The companies reasoned that after the strike they would have a new, more easily managed workforce—less skilled, to be sure, but also younger, less expensive, and, best of all, non-union.

This strategy led to a series of bitter strikes in major industries, which attracted media attention and scholarly study. Unfortunately, the stories typically ended when the strikes ended. Little has been written about the aftermath of permanent replacement strikes. My study of the 1987–88 strike by Local 14 of the United Paperworkers International Union (UPIU) against International Paper Company at its Androscoggin Mill in Jay, Maine, suggests that it is when the strike ends that the deep costs of hiring permanent replacements emerge.<sup>2</sup>

### **Bitter Decisions and Continuing Anger**

It is the former strikers who pay the greatest price, of course: when the strike ends, they face a series of bitter decisions. The first is whether to exercise their Laidlaw right to return to work when new openings arise. In Jay, a number of former strikers made a point of severing their relationship to the company. Horace Smith, an electrician, wrote to the mill's employee relations manager, explaining his decision: "I have too many more years left to work to spend them in misery." Joe Gatz, who had more than twenty-five years' seniority, stated, "If I went back in, there's still 650 people out there who'll never get their jobs back. I don't think I could live with myself."

Such sentiments were widespread, and former strikers who decided to return when the chance arose did so uneasily, feeling both guilt and continuing anger. As former striker Maurice Metivier told me, "I've never had anything tear me up inside like this. Some of us feel like traitors because we got our job back." Anger at the company was exacerbated by the humiliation of working alongside the replacement workers whom they had once vowed to evict from the mill.

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Peter Pelletier, a boiler-room operator, found the situation almost unbearable. “There was only a handful of people back. I worked with a bunch of scabs, a very antagonistic, hateful kind of situation to be in. You were alone, always surrounded by scabs.”

Concern with loyalty to fellow strikers meant that scabs were to be denied instruction. Brent Gay, a machine operator, explained, “Some of them come ask you about problems. ‘What do you think the problem is?’ I tell them, ‘I don’t know.’ Finally I told one guy, ‘I could tell you how to solve that. I’m not gonna. Every time I do that, I’m cutting a guy’s throat on the outside.’ ‘Oh, I understand.’ He never asked me again after that.”

Bruce Moran, a millwright, explained to me, “Every time you see a brother or sister that hasn’t got their job back, you feel a very sick feeling, knowing the only way they will get their job is if a scab dies or quits.”

Some of the former strikers made a determined effort to make life unbearable for the replacement workers so they would leave. “We had an underground movement and we’d discuss different ways of getting at them.” But there were more replacement workers than former strikers, and the great majority were not easily cowed. Some

replacement workers publicly heaped ridicule on the former strikers for “complaining about the shafting the company gave you for sitting on your ass for 25 years.”

### Surrounded by Hatred

By the end of the second year, when almost 300 strikers had returned, the



situation of the replacement workers was hardly better than that of the former strikers. They were surrounded by hatred—from the former strikers with whom they worked, and from most of

the supervisors who resented their presence and the obligation to train them.

The replacement workers were generally less hostile than the strikers. According to striker Maurice Metivier, they were “very friendly overall. I feel that most of it is guilt. ‘Cause why the hell would they be friendly towards us? We swore at them, cursed at them, we did everything you could possibly imagine.” The difference in feelings between the two groups was recognized by one of the replacements: “I didn’t hold any tension against them. I think they still do. If I was in their shoes, I probably would. You was in there doing the job for 30 years; you come back there as the lowest man in that department.”

For the low-level supervisors, many of whom were former union members, the end of the strike exacerbated tensions that had accumulated during the strike. Many rooted for the strikers, some openly, others secretly. But they were required to work with and train the replacement workers. And the strikers bitterly resented the supervisors’ role. The resentment grew worse

when strikers returned and observed the supervisors working in harmony with the replacements. The supervisors for their part felt unfairly judged. They became angry with the strikers for their rejection,

and they were furious with the company and the replacement workers for putting them in an untenable position.

Most despised were the former strikers who crossed the line to get their jobs back. They were called “super scabs” and were socially boycotted throughout the community, pariahs to neighbors and even to close relatives. Five years after the strike ended, one former striker told me, “I’ll talk to a scab but not a superscab. Even a scab hates a superscab.”

Darrel House, a union member whose decision during the strike to cross the line was well publicized, found his situation in the mill after the strike depressing at first, and then unbearable. “Some people that I’ve known for 20 years won’t speak to me. I can meet them face to face and they still don’t speak. That’s their choice. . . . There’s like a spirit of hatred and bitterness. And things are just not improving.” Five years after the strike ended, Darrel and his wife moved to Alaska.

### Total Disaster

The division and anger in the mill were echoed in the community. Every institution, from the Catholic Church to the high school, became a battleground where strike hatreds continued to be expressed. Former town manager Charles Noonan, testifying before a U.S. Senate Committee many years after the strike ended, stated that the strike “has torn the community apart. Friendships that existed for lifetimes are gone. What Jay once was, a proud and caring community, is now a divided, closed society which judges each individual on the basis of which side you may have taken in this labor dispute.” Asked to describe the town of Jay five years after the strike, Earl

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Fuller answered: “Total disaster. Property doesn’t move. Businesses are not profitable; schools are not what they were. Sense of community is gone. The area has become undesirable. Many deaths, broken marriages, lost homes, etc.”

High-level mill managers were resentful about the lack of work ethic but not sure how to deal with it. To impose strict discipline on both strikers and replacements might lead to the discharge of more replacement workers, whose place would be taken by former strikers. To single out former strikers might lead to a lawsuit and further exacerbate tensions. To ignore discipline meant the declining production and loss of respect for management. What happened was a futile effort to demonstrate firmness without imposing strong discipline.

In the years after the strike ended, replacement workers and former strikers were in agreement that both discipline and a work ethic were absent, and that the quality of the paper produced at Androscoggin Mill after the strike was poor. The remark, “I don’t know how the place can be making money,” was common. And in fact, the mill lost money regularly after the strike. James Livingston, who became manager of human resources in January 1989, agreed that “things were in a state of total upheaval.”

In the aftermath of the strike, a once-profitable enterprise became a financial and labor relations disaster. John Georges, CEO of International Paper Company, concluded that the labor policy that led to replacement of the strikers was a major mistake that cost the company more than a billion dollars. He was right, but his job, unlike that of the once-loyal workers, was not lost.

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### NOTES

1. See R. Walton, J. Cutcher-Gershenfeld, and R. McKersie, *Strategic Negotiation* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1994).
2. J. Getman, *The Betrayal of Local 14* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).



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