

Strikes, and other foolish wastes of time  
First published (9/5/94)

The former paper mill maintenance manager was asked to help out, as a multi-skilled maintenance worker, at a company mill as a 'scab' in the company's effort to 'strike bust' the local union's strike.

It was a bitter situation.

Crowds of mill workers gathered outside the gates, as the 'scab' shift change ritual occurred each morning and evening, yelling salutations and greetings to the incoming and outgoing management personnel being bussed between the mill and their 'secret' quarters off site. The strike would last too many weeks and tear apart the mill community in the process.

All of the 'volunteers' from other company locations came into the situation with the genuine belief that they were, in fact, saving the mill's future (management and union alike) by keeping the mill's customers satisfied by continuing to furnish an uninterrupted supply of product.

One morning soon after arrival, a few days after the strike had begun, the 'volunteer', let's call him Sam, was told that he was to go out to the front of the administration building, with an escort from the contract security force (affectionately referred to by the imported management volunteers as 'no-necks' because they all resembled professional wrestlers or football linemen who have the appearance of a body with shoulders supporting a head and no necks) and replace a broken sprinkler head in the front lawn, just feet away from one of the most hostile gatherings of striking mill workers.

"How many people do we have here in the maintenance group trying to keep this place operating?" Sam asked the local mill management person responsible for the day shift maintenance effort during the strike. The mill's regular maintenance manager had volunteered for the night shift, and all of the mill's maintenance supervisors were assigned to the multi-skill crews, either day or night shift. This setup maintenance manager 'running' the day shift crews was the leader for another department during normal operations.

"Nineteen, counting you, on two, twelve-hour shifts." responded the newly appointed maintenance day shift manager.

"And how many did we replace?" Sam queried.

"One hundred and twenty-four between the two mills." The day shift supervisor responded.

"And how many machines do we have up and running?" Sam asked, leading to a conclusion he knew was coming.

"All six, so what's your point, Sam?" the appointed day shift maintenance team leader asked.

"So there's nine and a half of us on a shift keeping six machines running that normally take one hundred and twenty four people, and you want me to spend my precious time, and possibly risk my neck as well, replacing a sprinkler head in the front lawn, just feet away from some of the most angry people I've seen?"

"Yes, because it's the symbolism that's important."

"You know, I once had a wise old union president tell me that he would never strike over money, but he would strike in a minute over a principle. It's my experienced opinion that those people standing out there by the gates right now aren't really striking over money either. I believe they are striking because of a principle, a principle that I just happen to share with them. It's a simple principle, actually...never work for an asshole. (the term of endearment commonly used to describe people with little regard or respect for others). And here is another little act of symbolism which I am sure you can appreciate," the former maintenance manager gestured with his four-fingered hand as he left the office.

The job was performed, because above everything else, the 'strike buster' was committed to fulfilling his obligation to the company. He didn't like the assignment, didn't agree with the reason, but his own values and beliefs, firmly entrenched in his moral and ethical standards, simply would not allow total disregard for a 'superior's' direct order as long as he was not directed to injure himself or anyone else. Of course his disrespect in the form of 'questioning authority' was evident from that moment forward until he left, and he and this supervisor clashed many, many times over the course of the strike.

The strike was settled in time. The ill-feelings that lingered on within that mill are still present and will remain so for a long time to come. The maintenance effort is still assigned along 'craft' lines, even though there was suppose to be a grand plan to change all this to a more flexible workforce, patterned after the multi-skilled and flexibly assigned 'replacement' workers brought in during the strike.

Bad decisions from a poor manager and, not surprisingly, a very ineffective leader can not be corrected by throwing these circumstantial problems at the workforce hoping they will solve the problem.

Was anything gained from this strike? Well, the 'strike busters' will all tell you they made very good money during the strike. Customers for the mill's paper products will tell you that they were happy to continue receiving product. The private college, where the volunteer 'strike busters' were sequestered, appreciated the unexpected revenue, but other than that, everyone lost. The tangible loss at the mill can be gauged by whatever ill effects a few weeks without normal, routine maintenance attention plays

upon the equipment and facilities. That can be fixed, at a premium of course.

The loss of pride, loss of respect, loss of concern and caring by both sides in the issue though will remain for a long, long time. Was it worth it?

(Author's update: This site is no longer operating. It was shutdown within a few years after this incident, never fully able to recover, nor make the required efficiency changes initially sought by management and leading to the strike.)