

EXPERIENCES OF A PROFESSOR WHO DARED TO CROSS PROFESSORIAL PICKET LINES

By Ronald L. Trowbridge

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Dr. Trowbridge delivered this presentation at Hillsdale during the Center for Constructive Alternatives seminar on "The Future of American Labor Unions." This presentation also serves as his introduction to IMPRIMIS readers as the recently appointed Editor.

I wish to share with you the experiences I encountered and the revelations I endured when as a Professor of English I crossed a faculty picket line recently at Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti, Michigan. I was, of course, aware of all the nasty things that happen when individuals cross picket lines, but I imagined—naively so—that strikes by intellectual, broadminded, tolerant academicians would be different. To the contrary, I suffered the depressing revelation of seeing some of my colleagues and once very close friends transform into characters I no longer recognized—changing from butterflies back into worms. These were people I had known for years, had partied with, had researched with, had agreed with, had become close to during my fourteen years at the university. And while the strike, in the fall of 1978, did not last long, I'm not so sure that violence at least on some small scale would have been avoided had the strike continued much longer.



The strike, illegal by Michigan state law and the first in the school's history, began on a Monday. In an English department of 68 members I was but one of three not to honor the illegal act. Illegality seems not really to have bothered them; perhaps it was this same kind of carefree mentality that would later re-elect Congressman Charles Diggs, though convicted on 29 criminal counts.

The pressure by friends on me to strike was relentless; for non-conformity I was made to feel odd and nearly embarrassed. A good many of my colleagues I suspect, however, really didn't approve of the illegal strike, feeling it also to be *infra dignitatem*. But perhaps they lacked the courage to be at conspicuous odds with their friends; if like ostriches they stuck their heads in the sand and stayed at home with academic

im•pri•mis (im-pri-mis) adv. In the first place. Middle English, from Latin *in primis*, among the first (things).

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flu, who would care or know? It was easy to stay home—even more so after the administration announced that it would not bring charges against anyone for breaking the law. They would suffer only impunity.

I also feel that a good many of my colleagues admired my principled independence in crossing the picket line. I must confess that it was very difficult for me to run counter deliberately and conspicuously to what my friends really wanted. I felt bad, but I simply found it impossible, viscerally and philosophically, to strike. Could they not respect my honest convictions as they had respected, say, Henry David Thoreau's for not going along with the crowd?

the lieutenant governorship of the state of Michigan, was first appointed President by our Board of Regents. The faculty had objected to the process by which he had been selected, and therefore called for a protesting picket line around the Regents' office. I was asked, even though not a member of the AAUP (American Association of University Professors) union, to join in in this picket line so as to demonstrate "solidarity" for a cause affecting all faculty. I politely declined. Several colleagues, one at a time, attempted to pressure me into joining the picket line. I recall vividly one faculty member, Frank _____, pleading that I join in. We were in the hallway between class sessions in the largest classroom building on campus, the Pray-Harrold build-



My position on strikes actually was a surprise to no one. They had learned long ago by statements I had distributed faculty-wide about my stance on unionization and strikes; I had quietly declared that under no circumstances then imaginable would I ever strike. I regarded my college teaching position, frankly, as a kind of semi-retirement: working conditions were excellent, the pay reasonably good for the amount of conscientious work I put in, and I could never imagine any situation so intolerable at the university as to demand a strike. Still, my English department colleagues were complaining about working conditions. Yet most of these colleagues and I worked about 25 hours a week, and when honest about it, we confessed so. In terms of publication and extracurricular activities, I was doing as much as, if not more than, most of the people in my department. If my workload was so heavy, how then could I possibly have managed to work 15 hours a week as Editor-in-Chief of an academic quarterly journal, another 15 hours every week as an Ann Arbor City Councilman, in addition to doing a fair amount of publication? I would never be rich; on the other hand, I knew of no other job that began at 9:00 and ended at 3:00 on just Monday, Wednesday, and Friday.

My opposition to picketing had also been demonstrated far earlier by an incident that occurred when E.M.U. President James Brickley, recently elected to

ing; at least 300 students were in the hallway. Having been told "No," Frank walked away, but I could see that he was apoplectic about my unwillingness to agree with *his* definition of justice. When he got about 75 feet away from me, with some 50 students between us, he turned around unable to take it any longer and screamed back to me, "You ass _ _ _ _!"

Sadly, I laughed inwardly; the irony was frustrating: Had I said to him, "Frank, I want you in the next election to vote Republican for the good of the country, just as you requested that I join the picket line for the good of the school," he would of course have responded in utter disbelief, "I don't want to vote Republican; I'm a Democrat." Of course. He should have the freedom to vote as he wishes, just as I should have the inalienable right to join or not join a picket line or union.

But I had seen nothing yet. Frank's hypocritical double standard would be pervasive among other colleagues, as I would learn later when the strike began. When the strike was imminent, the atmosphere around the faculty offices, hallways, and lounges was that of pleasurable vindictiveness; it took on the air of an impending football game: the us versus them would be fun, and surely virtue and God were on our side against those calloused "bastards" on the other side.

As I approached the door of Pray-Harrold building

on the first day of the strike, it was manned and womaned by about 30 players of the English department—friends all. I felt awkward and embarrassed; I didn't like the impending trauma and truly wished the whole thing would go away. But even more impossible was any thought whatsoever of honoring an illegal strike by remaining home "ill." At the door, most of the faculty looked at me and laughed disapprovingly; though strained, matters were fairly amiable. It was, after all, only the opening kick off of the big game.

Monday and Tuesday passed with no resolution of the strike. Most of the classrooms were empty; about 85% of the faculty had stayed home, though most

one listen to Mozart, read Jane Austen, speak French, attend teas and then degenerate into a mobster? As the poet William Blake had asked of the tiger: "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?" I wondered, too, whether people resorting to use of such a scurrilous term as "scab" would also use such similar-minded terms as "nigger," "whop," "kike," and the like?

There was yet another irony: the illegally striking faculty never lost pay, yet called *me* a "scab." As I understand it, scab implies a parasite that lives off something else—as they were doing, not I. So here I was, the individual working and getting paid, while my accusers were not working and drawing a salary. No



students attended classes that were still taught. This lack of support by the students angered the faculty, so one-sided, sensational union position papers were quickly printed and distributed to them. Students were informed that the faculty and union were entirely innocent and that the administration was exclusively the cause of the impasse. The union, after all, was only asking for what is reasonable, such as: a salary increase of around 20% for one year, and an agency shop at a university where approximately 60% of the faculty did not belong to the union. Only 300 out of 660 were members.

I returned to teach on Wednesday and could see that matters were more intense. This time faces that before smiled were now frowning. Negative comments began. I must here interject that during all this I was a Republican candidate for the Michigan State Senate. One colleague, Sheila _____, wanting very much to hurt me, said that Ed Pierce, my Democratic opponent, had just walked the picket line in support of the strikers and that "he has won all our support." Sheila then stared at me, with a scowling, sardonic face, and said, "Scab." She *really* meant it, and I saw in her a degeneration into a Yahoo that I had not thought likely. We had been good friends.

The incongruities were at once apparent: intellectual professors became anything but intellectual. How could

one need ask who the real scabs were.

Something very reassuring also happened during the strike: a good many students though badgered at the picket lines continued to attend the few classes available; and I recall, happily, attending my lecture class that had a scheduled enrollment of 300 students. Expecting to find my lecture hall virtually deserted, I walked in and discovered to my utter amazement about 250 students in the room. And at the moment that these students saw that I had had the courage to brave a picket line that had even harrassed them, they broke into an unsolicited, thunderous round of applause. Many came up after class and thanked me for caring about them, since it was obvious that most of the faculty members outside really did not. To be sure, some of the strikers made pretenses of concern for students, but their chief concern was with themselves, not with the students, their wives or husbands, their parents, not even with the taxpayers in the state of Michigan who would ultimately have to bear most of the cost of all this. I do say in all candor that I did not cross picket lines to become a campus hero, but did so out of deeper convictions that also included my obligations to students.

As a candidate for State Senate, I was also the focus of much media attention. On the first day of the strike my office was surrounded by media personnel asking

obvious questions about my non-conformity. I gave them candid responses, which were the next day, among other places, printed favorably on the front page of the *Ann Arbor News*, the largest newspaper in the county. My comments and their favorable treatment by press and radio infuriated many of the strikers. The paper quoted me as saying that as a city lawmaker and as one aspiring to be a state lawmaker, I would be a hypocrite to willingly break state law by striking. Moreover, I indicated that the opportunistic thing for me to have done would have been to cooperate with my colleagues—many of whose votes I lost in not following their desires. I should also here reveal that some officials of the Republican party in Lansing warned me that under no circumstances should I cross the picket line. "Be ill," they said. No election, I recalcitrantly responded, was worth a prostitution of my own principles.

Going to my classes the day after the stories hit the radio stations and newspapers, I encountered a now very angry bunch. This time as I walked toward the Pray-Harold door, many of the faculty did not wait for me to arrive, rushing up a good half block to meet me and forming a circle around me. Jay ———, a full professor, my telephone mate, a good friend, and a man I had known and worked with for 14 years, was so angry that I feared literally that he might punch me. His face was bursting out, his blue vessels shown clearly, and he was near hyperventilation. Not only had I not gotten the message by being about to cross the picket line again, but the media exposé was the last straw. "You made us look bad," he said, breathing even harder. When I started to explain that I did not seek out the media to embarrass anyone but rather was sought out by them because of my well-known candidacy, he would not let me finish and yelled, "Bull ———! I thought you were a man of principle but I see that you are only a political opportunist." Reasoned discourse with Jay at this point was utterly impossible, though he was a gray-haired, full grown adult—well, at least in years anyway.

The hatred directed toward me, I later found, was greater than that toward any other colleague who did not honor the picket line, who were very few in number. The reason I drew much animosity soon became apparent: I had been the one who in newspapers seen widely by the public had taken a reasonable position, which by contrast made the strikers' illegal action appear less reasonable. I am reminded here of a quotation by Iago on Cassio in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Iago, the villain, is all the more eager to dispose of Cassio, a good man, because Cassio's good example makes Iago's depravity by contrast look all the worse. Says Iago of Cassio, "He hath a daily beauty in his life that makes me ugly." Just so at E.M.U.

Professor Jay ———, still not through with me, was about to deliver the most devastating blow I would receive during the two-week nightmare. His apoplectic

red eyes staring into mine, the breathing yet heavier, my telephone mate's blow to the solar plexus came: "That's it, Trowbridge, I am *never* again going to answer your telephone!" I was crushed. Egads, did I want to laugh and had literally to struggle to keep from doing so, lest I incur the wrath of Jay and others surrounding me. I restrained myself till I got to the classroom, where I recounted all to my students, who all joined in in horse laughter. Jay is 43 years old.

During the strike my students were incessantly stopped at picket lines and questioned by incredulous faculty as to whose class they were attending. Owing to the size of my lecture class, my name came to be quite infamous. Many of the students were then directed by strikers to pass on to me certain comments and gestures, such as "Up yours," "scab," "give him the finger," and many of X-rated rank. Presumably after the strike these critics would return to reading Shakespeare, listening to Schubert, and drinking sherry. I am reminded here of the incongruity Tom Wolfe so wonderfully devastates in *Radical Chic and Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers*, where Leonard Bernstein hosts with excellent cuisine and elevated taste .38-caliber-revolver-bearing Black Panthers who have probably murdered a slew of people. "Do the Panthers," the novel inquires, "like little Roquefort cheese morsels rolled in crushed nuts this way, and asparagus tips in mayonnaise dabs, and *meatballs petites au Coq Hardi*, all of which are at this very moment being offered to them on gadrooned silver platters by maids in black uniforms with hand-ironed white aprons...?"

Though it was the intolerance of my academic friends to accept viewpoints different from their own that disillusioned me most about the strike, the incongruity Wolfe parodies was my next most saddening experience. Dapperly dressed, gray-haired, pipe-smoking, distinguished-looking professors were carrying picket signs that displayed cheap comments, their demeanor reminding me more of the Chicago Seven than ladies and gentlemen of integrity. Frankly, I wondered if some of my formerly more distinguished colleagues were themselves not embarrassed by their own display but unable to contradict the spoken and unspoken pressure from peers that is intensely powerful. The same power of conformity that would compel hundreds of people in Jonestown, Guyana, to drink poison was operating—on a lesser scale, of course—at E.M.U. I have no doubt that some of my colleagues chose to honor the strike rather than contradict friends, as that was far less embarrassing. This unprincipled acquiescence is unfortunate because it is one chief way unions gain power. Related to this, F. A. Hayek observed:

It cannot be stressed enough that the coercion which unions have been permitted to exercise contrary to all principles of freedom under the law is primarily the coercion of fellow workers. Whatever true coercive power unions may be able to wield over employers is a consequence of this primary power of coercing

other workers; the coercion of employers would lose most of its objectionable character if unions were deprived of this power to exact unwilling support.

While faculty sorts let us know of their opposition to Watergate and of clandestine CIA-like subterfuge, some of my colleagues were hypocritically indulging in their own. Professor Walter _____ was taking photographs during the strike of faculty members crossing the picket line. Walter had told me that he was going to take my picture crossing the picket line and send it to my political opponent. At one point, however, he fell off the ledge he was elevated on to get clear shots and damaged his expensive camera—no doubt divine Providence meting out poetic justice. AAUP officials, I learned later, had given approval to the picture-taking.

The strike by now had lasted one week, and by that following Monday it was obvious it would continue indefinitely. In view of the fact that only about 5-10% of the instructors were continuing to hold classes, the administration therefore decided to suspend all classes officially. A good many students commuting from long distances were confused as to which classes would be in session and which would not, and some had driven over 100 miles a day just to attend one class. I was, nonetheless, somewhat disappointed with the administration's cancellation of all classes, regarding it at bottom as an acquiescence to union demands. The administration was in one way sacrificing principles to expedience and allowing the union to pull ahead in a contest that was, after all, illegal by state law.

With school called off, the strike lasted one more week, for a total of two—during all of which time the faculty continued to receive full salary and fringe benefits. Some sacrifice. Unfortunately most of the people in the outside world had assumed all along that striking faculty members were not getting paid; and of the few outsiders who learned otherwise, most were shocked. Moreover, even many members of other unions within the university, *e.g.*, secretaries and janitors, were noticeably perturbed with the faculty in view of the inconsistent fact that faculty was paid while striking whereas members of other university unions had not been paid when they had struck in preceding years.

On the first day following the strike's end, I went with hesitation to the faculty lunchroom at noon. I knew I would be ridiculed and treated with condescension. I was not wrong. Donald _____ said, with a huge smile on his face, but meaning it nonetheless, "There's Trowbridge, no he's not a scab, he's an oozing, running sore." Scores of laughter erupted. Donald holds a Ph.D. from Kent State University and is 50 years old.

One of the agreed terms of settlement between administration and union was a modified agency shop, the injustice of which, to me, is not even debatable. Every individual should have the inalienable right not to join a union; and I simply cannot understand a logic that

grants me the right to be a Republican or Democrat but not a union or non-union member. At E.M.U. I would be granted three enslaving options: one, join the union and pay annual dues; two, not join the union and pay an amount roughly commensurate with annual dues; three, not join the union and pay an amount roughly commensurate with annual dues to an E.M.U. scholarship fund.

The wage settlement was 6.1%; when the amount of union dues, $\frac{3}{4}$ of 1%, is subtracted, the total wage increase amounted to 5.3%. I responded to the union people that that was hardly worth all the hassle of the strike. Their reply was, of course, that had it not been for the union and the strike we would have gotten much lower than 6.1%—Catch 22. I don't believe it. The administration in the past had always been reasonable; in point of fact salary raises were as high or higher before the faculty unionized. From my own experiences as a working faculty member, all that I could see that this unionism had accomplished was a divisive pitting of the us against the them, and an elimination of the pleasantries that once existed between administration and faculty. We were, after all, supposed to be all on the same side, working together toward the same cause. But this unionism required that we be at odds and that if there were not conflict, then the union would generate it. This union began by putting a chip on its shoulder and hoping that the administration would knock it off.

As to the modified agency shop, the rationale for that quickly surfaced in our lunchroom discussion. The chief purpose, it was agreed, of the coerced contribution to the scholarship fund by non-union members was to punish vindictively those who refused to join the union. Upon the revealing of this truth, full professor Gene _____, Ph.D., a white-haired southern gentleman with proper etiquette and diction, and a former administrator with a prestigious position at the University of Michigan, stared at me, knowing that I was the only one in the crowded lunchroom who did not belong to the union, stuck out his chin, and shook his head back and forth rapidly, saying, "Goody, Goody, Goody, Goody!" Gene is 58 years old.

Another colleague, Martin _____, a very good friend, confided to me later with deep seriousness: "Ron, your name is mud around here." I knew he meant it, and it hurt. One cannot cavalierly dismiss friendships after 14 years. One very small reason I decided to leave E.M.U. was that I found pathetic the narrowminded intolerance there to differing viewpoints, nor did the prospects of enduring such myopia for the next 25 years look encouraging. I knew, further, in view of the newly-imposed agency shop and of decreasing student enrollments at the university that matters were going to get much worse, with the union—as it had openly urged—"girding its loins for battle." I prefer to work other than in the zoo with "trousered apes."

Two apt observations by William Buckley come to mind. He once said that "though liberals do a great deal of talking about hearing other points of view, it sometimes shocks them to learn that there *are* other points of view." And he said elsewhere that he would rather have Cambridge, Massachusetts, run by the first 2,000 names in the Cambridge telephone directory than by the faculty at Harvard. So, too, with me at Ypsilanti, Michigan. We would do well to remember that George Orwell's *1984* was directed, not against the laboring classes or the uneducated or the people—that is, normal folks who live in Ypsilanti—, but against the

intellectuals—many of whom instruct at E.M.U.—who oppose fascism without opposing totalitarianism.

When I left E.M.U. recently, though having been a colleague there for 14 years, there were no formal farewells, no teas, no goodbye parties—as is always the custom—, no nothing. The transformation of my colleagues had been complete. Is there any wonder as to why I am pleased to be at Hillsdale College, which champions, unlike that union, the independent sovereignty and freedom of the individual? I am happy to be aboard.

Malcolm Muggeridge Coming to Hillsdale

Malcolm Muggeridge, the brilliantly articulate speaker from England, will be among several distinguishing speakers participating in the Center for Constructive Alternatives seminar February 4-9, 1979. Mr. Muggeridge will be on the Hillsdale campus Thursday and Friday, February 8 and 9. His major speech on the evening of February 8 will be open to the public and free of charge.



Hillsdale College is marked by its strong independence and its emphasis on academic excellence. It holds that the traditional values of Western civilization, especially including the free society of responsible individuals, are worthy of defense. In maintaining these values, the college has remained independent throughout its 134 years, neither soliciting nor accepting government funding for its operations.
