

Don't Cross the Picket Line!

**Strike Solidarity
for Beginners**



cover image

Tobacco worker, Richmond,
Virginia, October 1938

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2006683677/>

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I'm a brand new union member who is learning a lot about the work that goes into organizing. I'm also realizing how little I know about unions!

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 10% of workers are members of a union. Back in the 1950s, about 1 in 3 workers were in a union. Over the years, the United States corporate and government leadership has actively worked to dismantle labor rights as they've increased their own pay.

If only 10% of workers are in a union, of course it makes sense that most of us don't know much about them! We don't learn much about labor history in school, and when we do it's often presented as dry and irrelevant to students' interests.

I'm hoping this zine is an approachable introduction to one of the most visible forms of action (strikes) for people who don't know much about unions.



King Farm strike,
Morrisville, Pennsylvania, August 1938
<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2017762569/>

What is a union, anyway?

A union is a group of workers coming together to negotiate fair pay and good working conditions. The people who run businesses are concerned about profit above all else. A union allows workers to try to level the playing field by working together. This takes the form of negotiating as a group to secure things like higher wages, better benefits, better working conditions, and greater job security.

Unions negotiate with an employer to do things like improve safety rules, or ensure workers can have more predictable work schedules, or provide better health insurance options.



Woolworth workers,
Detroit, Michigan, February 1937
<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2005696047/>

OK, then, what's a strike?

A strike is when union members vote to stop working, whether for one day, a few days, or indefinitely.

The normal process of agreeing on a contract is a series of negotiations between the employees and the store management. It's only when that process fails that union workers consider striking. Workers only decide to strike when conditions and/or pay have gotten very bad and other tactics have failed.



Tex-Son garment workers strike,
San Antonio, Texas, 1959

<https://library.uta.edu/digitalgallery/img/10002671>

What do you mean they stop working? Like, they just don't show up to work?

Right. They don't go to work, and they don't get paid by their employer. You can imagine how stressful that would be, to not get paid for an indefinite amount of time. It's a scary prospect! U.S. law isn't usually very worker-friendly, but union members in private-sector jobs generally have the right to strike without losing their jobs.

Union members regularly pay dues to be part of their union, and part of that money goes into a strike fund, a pot of money used to help support workers if they ever go on strike. Strike pay is usually much lower than a worker's normal pay, it helps pay for necessities (like rent and food) and not much else. Even once a contract is signed, striking workers generally don't get back pay for the time they weren't working, unless the federal government decides the employer was doing something very illegal.

While employees are striking, they often form picket lines, to let people know about their strike and to convince others to support their cause. Being disruptive and highly visible is a strategy to demonstrate to employers that they can't just ignore the workers' requests and go about their business as usual.



Flint Sit-Down Strike,
Flint, Michigan, February 1937
<https://www.workers.org/2020/07/50061/>

What should I do when I see a picket line?

Let's imagine you're going to the grocery store and you see striking workers holding signs and chanting.

Don't go into that grocery store! That's called crossing the picket line, and it's bad because it demonstrates you don't care about those workers and their struggle to be treated fairly. Is there another grocery store or convenience store nearby? Can you get your groceries delivered from another store? Can you order some of what you need online? Hopefully you have enough other options to hold out on going to that specific grocery store until the workers have gotten their demands met.

Now imagine: you're on vacation. You come back to your hotel and there's a picket line outside the hotel entrance. What do you do?

Walking into the hotel means crossing the picket line. Instead, ask one of the strikers what the strike is about. On a strike line, there will be a strike team leader that you can direct questions to. Can you bring them anything, like a few bottles of cold water or some snacks? Can you make a small donation to their strike fund? You could even ask if you can join in and walk with them for a while. It's easy—you just hold a sign and join in the chants.

If you're not up for all that, can you, at minimum, hang out somewhere else until the strike action is over?

Maybe you can't wait. Let's say you forgot your medications in your hotel room, or you have kids who desperately need a nap. You decide you need to cross the line. How can you make that right? By showing solidarity in other ways. Briefly explain that you need to enter, but ask if you can make a strike fund donation. Look online for petitions to sign in support of the workers. Write an email to the hotel saying as a loyal customer you won't stay at any of their chain locations until they negotiate a fair contract with their workers.

Then, when you're planning your next vacation, do an internet search, something like "[name of hotel] strike" or "[name of hotel chain] union." Is the hotel you're planning on booking notorious for exploiting their workers? If their workers are striking on the regular, that's a problem! Union members only do that when they're extremely distressed.



Arthur Murray Dance Studio strike,
Los Angeles, California, July 1947
<https://www.vintageinn.ca/2017/11/vintage-photo-tuesday-1949-dancing-teachers-strike/>

I'd like to help, but late-stage capitalism has me tired as fuck.

I get it. We can't research every single thing about every action we take in life, or every purchase we make. No one is asking for perfection. But we *can* be more aware of labor actions happening in our neighborhoods and on the news. We can choose to not gloss over stories about union activity as "not our problem." Any worker exploitation *is* our problem, because we're all being exploited by our employers. Once you start to pay even a little attention, you'll start to hear over and over about the employers who are problems, and you'll learn that you should avoid giving those companies your money.

Ways to show solidarity with striking workers

- Read picket signs. Do they have a flyer? Take it and read it.
- Be curious. Ask questions. What have they experienced that made them decide to go on strike? What are they hoping to achieve?
- Treat striking workers with respect. They're doing the work to help themselves and their coworkers. If their strike is making your life less convenient, remember it's their moneygrubbing employers who are the real problem.

- Did something good happen? Maybe a concession was won during negotiations? Celebrate! Striking is hard and it's important to support striking workers with good energy.
- Share the word. Many people have no idea that there are labor fights happening in their own backyards, or they don't think it's relevant to them. Visibility puts pressure on management to get their act together.
- Normalize supporting workers. When your friend wants to hit up a non-unionized Starbucks (95% of them aren't unionized!), suggest a better coffee place, one that doesn't screw over their employees.

Where to learn more

Here's some fun, accessible ways to learn more about strikes.

-  *Fight Like Hell: The Untold History of American Labor* by Kim Kelly (2022)
– This book is full of engaging stories, making clear the commonalities of labor struggles from past to present, from Pullman Porters to field workers to sex workers.
-  *Wage Slaves* by Daria Bogdanska (2019) – A graphic novel showing the struggles of the author trying to navigate the struggles of working as an immigrant getting paid under the table, and finding the courage to advocate for better pay. Ask your local library to get it for you through interlibrary loan.

- 🎬 *Newsies* (1992) – Yes, the Disney musical! The challenge is to not focus on how good 18-year-old Christian Bale is in this movie (he's very good) and instead focus on the storyline, based on the New York City Newsboys' Strike of 1899.
- 🎬 *Pride* (2014) – Heartwarming drama about the group of London lesbians and gays who came together to raise money to support workers during the Welsh Miners' Strike of 1984.
- 💻 Working Class History – I've learned so much from this podcast and website. Check out their 2019 podcast episode "The Exotic Dancers Union," about the Lusty Lady strip club for a great story.



Mid-City Realty strike,
South Chicago, Illinois, July 1941
<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2017812574/>