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Factors That Led to Crossing a Picket Line: An Autoethnography of a Faculty Striker

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In 2019, I faced one of the most difficult life decisions as a pro-union advocate. A foreseen strike led to an unforeseen personal dilemma that caused me and my family anxiety, financial worries, and job uncertainty. This narrative reflects on aspects of a strike that unions and administration need to give more consideration, such as a strike fund, how coercion and persuasion are used by the administration and union, the importance of a physical union presence at smaller university system campuses, and the union cause and solidarity may not be the overall driving force for strike participation.

Since 2017, Wright State University (WSU) faculty members had been operating under the 2014-2017 contract. By the fall of 2018, there was a tense standoff between the WSU administration and the WSU chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP-WSU) union. In this essay, I argue that strikers live in a complex lived reality where their lives are not dictated by one issue but by an intersectional perspective. Here, intersectionism refers to the interdependent overlaying of roles and responsibilities that may impact decision-making. Therefore, individuals do not only strike for the cause and for solidarity with their colleagues, but they also must consider factors such as finances, roles, and family obligations. Placing the strike in context, I present an autoethnographic narrative as a faculty striker.

The Lake Campus

WSU–Lake Campus is a regional campus of approximately 1,100 students from a predominately White, German Catholic community. The Lake Campus is about 75 minutes from the main campus in Dayton, Ohio. The commute from my home to the regional campus is 75 minutes. The commute to the main campus in Dayton is two hours and thirty minutes. (This will later become a factor in my participation in the strike.)

In August 2013, I accepted a full-time, tenure-track position as an assistant professor of sociology at WSU–Lake Campus. My family's move from Kansas to Fort Wayne, Indiana, was

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not only for my career but also for my family. I was now closer to my parents, for whom I had been caregiving from a distance.

At the time, the dean at Lake Campus appeared to have a cordial relationship with the main campus. However, I quickly realized that there was an "us versus them" mentality in the campus culture at Lake Campus. This division was amplified with the next Lake Campus dean. Some at the Lake Campus believed that the main campus was taking advantage of the Lake Campus. The atmosphere seemed to be that main campus was taking too much money from the Lake, more than any other regional gives to their main campus. There was and still is an issue about course and program proprietary ownership. Courses that are at the main campus belong to the main campus and seem to be used by the Lake Campus only when the main campus designates it. This may not be true on paper, but it is the perception that I have gathered. Programs are allowed to exist at the Lake Campus. There appears to be an interaction between several departments, such as nursing, education, and engineering. Though this atmosphere was present when I started, it was perpetuated by the dean at the time. In the grand history of the Lake Campus, I have not been there long and cannot speak to the complete relationship between the Lake Campus and the main campus. However, the administration and union must include and be present at the Lake Campus. I feel like there are two separate worlds, the main campus and Lake Campus. We do not even share the same mascot. Lake Campus has its own identity. There is nothing wrong with having an identity, but it can be detrimental to the union centered on the main campus.

A Brief History of Academic Strikes

Historically, academic strikes are infrequent and short-lived. Much of the research on this subject examines why academic strikes occur; however, few explore the individual, intersectional striker. Between 1966 and 1994, 163 higher education strikes occurred (Annunziato, 1994). Within those 28 years, 35% of these strikes lasted five days or less, 19% lasted six to 10 days, and 46% lasted more than 11 days. More recently, between 2013 and 2017, 21 strikes took place (Herbert & Apkarian, 2017). Seventy-one percent lasted five days or less, 19% lasted between six to 10 days, and 10% lasted more than 11 days. An essential feature of how unions encourage and prepare their members to strike is their estimate of how long the strike will last, often based on the duration of past strikes. For example, from 2018 to 2019 at WSU, the AAUP convinced its members to strike, in part, by anticipating a short strike based on the duration of prior strikes. This proved not to be the case and was detrimental to some members' interests.

I reflect on the day the Lake Campus union liaison came into my office. I was surprised to see them. I was not aware that the Lake Campus had liaisons. We started talking about the union

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and the importance of striking. I could feel the heat in my body rising. I did not want to think about striking because of the potential money that I would lose, and I could not afford it. I cannot remember if they eventually sat, but the emphasis was on the importance of striking and the duration of the strike. I knew the importance of striking, probably more than they. It was a bit condescending. But then they started talking about how they thought it would last two to three days, a week at the most. I knew better. I had heard of a strike at a Canadian college that lasted the majority of a semester, and then the college had to reimburse tuition to students. I needed the hope of the illusion that this strike would be short. I needed this to be true, so in my head, I made it true.

There appeared to be a formal, emailed approach and an informal approach. When I reviewed the emails sent from the union for this reflection, I noticed that the union was specific in stating they did not know how long the strike would last. However, this was not the narrative that was emphasized when the liaison was speaking with me. I think we all hoped it would not be long, two to three days or a week at the most. Based on faculty strike history in higher education, I can understand this hope. I call it "hope" because I think some of us had a feeling it could be longer. I was doubtful, but the "hope" that it would be a short strike gave me some motivation to strike. Reflecting, it was an illusion I think many created in hopes it would be true. As the strike progressed, I believe this illusion of a short strike came back to haunt the union and me. I would hear comments that "the union said it would be a short strike." It was the informal narrative that colleagues remembered, not the emails.

Magney (2002) examined several academic strikes, including Ferris State University, Elgin Community College, Kaskaskia Community College, Wayne State University, and Eastern Michigan. Some higher education institutions have gone on strike several times, such as Ferris State University in 1978, 1986, and 1997. These academic strikes called for better health benefits and wages, job security, layoff criteria, and the faculty's role in governance. Magney (2002) noted that four strikes had no strike pay fund and others offered low-interest loans. Therefore, the strikers appeared to be striking at their own expense. This was the case during the WSU strike; strike pay was not provided, potentially creating additional financial hardship and factors that could determine strike participation. We had hoped that back pay would be given after the strike. We were not able to get back pay. This was a blow.

The lack of strike pay was a surprise for me. There would be no compensation at all. This surprise was highlighted when the union liaison came to my office to discuss the strike. I had asked about strike pay. The liaison looked confused. They suggested that there would be no strike pay provided. As the literature and union suggested, there were many reasons for striking. It was the potential loss of tenure that pushed me over the edge and gained the support of my

husband. The other reasons were not central to my decision. Tenure and the principle of strikes and unions were my driving force. My concern with tenure and job security appears to be warranted as I heard my previous institution, Emporia State University in Kansas under the Kansas Board of Regents (KBOR), had suspended tenure for Fall 2022.

All unions prepared similarly with off-campus headquarters, picket line sites, picket duties with captains, signs, public relations, and contact with other unions. These preparations seemed essential to creating union solidarity and support within the community. Finally, at times, not all the faculty choose to strike, such as in the case at Wayne State University (Magney, 2002). At Wright State University, this created silos of those who went on strike and those who did not, affecting the morale of the remaining faculty and adjuncts who took over classes for striking faculty.

Lead Up to the Strike: 2017–2019

Up until the 2019 strike, AAUP–WSU had negotiated six contracts that focused on pay raises and ensured that faculty members were being paid at market value. The 2017 contract negotiations proved contentious, leading to the first strike at WSU.

The events that led to the strike began in March 2016 when the AAUP voiced concerns regarding the university's budget. From July to October 2016, the university reduced its budgets university wide and announced a voluntary retirement incentive program. In addition, teaching workloads were circumspect. Professors were being pressured by department chairs and deans to count two courses with low enrollment as one. Then in November 2016, the AAUP announced that it would pursue a vote of no confidence for the vice president for research and the dean of the graduate school. During this time, the AAUP sent email notices of the dates and times of Board of Trustees meetings, encouraging members to attend the meetings. These emails continued until the strike began.

The lead-up to the strike spanned the next two and a half years. Throughout this time, negotiations had been suspended several times, but the parties always seemed to return to the negotiating table. On April 7, 2017, the administration hired outside counsel, which was out of the norm. Negotiations were not productive, and in July 2017, a factfinder was implemented. Importantly, October 5, 2017, seemed to be the first time I had heard that Lake Campus would have union liaisons. During this time, faculty narratives were created by the administration and union, as illustrated by the November 3, 2017 email in which the faculty was being unfairly depicted as greedy and lazy rather than fighters for the faculty and students. AAUP narratives included "A fight for a fair contract is a fight for students," "Fewer faculty = a lesser education,"

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and “Only 17% of tuition and fee dollars go to full-time faculty base salaries and benefits.” In January 2018, everything seemed to be moving quickly, and the union announced a strike authorization vote. This was to be used to show the urgency of the union and the willingness of the members to strike. When the factfinder’s report was delivered in October 2018, the membership voted to reject the report in November 2018. Up to this time, the union had been under the 2014-2017 CBA (article 38 suggesting the old contract would be in effect until a new agreement was reached) (Jacobs, 2022). As a result, on January 7, 2019, a formal strike notice was filed. The strike began on January 22 at eight am and ended on February 10, 2019. The disputed issues were workload, job security for non-tenure eligible faculty (NTE), summer teaching, lack of pay raise, health benefit premiums, and furloughs. These were significant concerns; however my biggest concern, which was eventually taken off the table by the administration, was the possibility of taking away tenure.

Autoethnography

This autoethnographic essay examines my experience as a participant in the 2019 WSU faculty strike and the factors that led a pro-union advocate to cross a figurative picket line. The autoethnographic approach provides a reflexive narrative that creates a nuanced understanding of a phenomenon as a research method. Reflexivity is defined as relaying the experience, memory, or event to an audience and then connecting to the social context. My shared narrative will provide a lived experience that creates a familiar culture for the insider and allows the outsider to understand the experience of the phenomena (Ellis et al., 2011). Through critical reflexive analysis, the personal narratives (auto) are interpreted, examined, and connected (graphy) to the phenomena of the strike (ethno) (Adams & Herrmann, 2020). The personal narrative is connected to such issues as union solidarity, coercive power, and principles versus reality. These are the intersectional factors and contributors that can push a pro-union advocate to cross a picket line.

Solidarity and Class Consciousness

Langford (1994) questions the consciousness of strikers. Do all strikers change their political perspective, or do strikers participate in the strike for the same reasons? The political perspective could explain my surprise when I learned that a colleague was pro-union yet conservative on other issues. The second aspect of Langford’s question suggests that individuals have different motivations to strike. Social context can play an important role. Langford presents an illusion of a “culture of solidarity” (1994). In other words, an individual might strike purely for solidarity, not necessarily for the union cause. Solidarity is the community, comradery, and oneness with colleagues that are in the same place and experiencing the same thing. The union

member strikes for fellow workers. The cause is the issues in dispute in bargaining. Though each person may connect to a different cause, the solidarity aspect may be the most compelling aspect to strike. Solidarity committees can be essential in appealing to individuals to strike and communicate with strikers (Balanoff, 1985). Therefore, building solidarity may be crucial to a successful strike, especially an extended one.

At WSU, the strike headquarters was located in a hotel across from the main campus, serving as the base of the solidarity committee and reinforcing the existential principles of the union. Additionally, Fowler et al. (2009) suggest that higher levels of union involvement reduce anxiety and improve mental health. The importance of solidarity committees appeared to be confirmed at WSU as the strikers seemed reinvigorated by HQ at the main campus. However, there was no equivalent at the regional campus.

Solidarity was high among union members at the regional campus and evident at the main campus. Most of the time, though, I felt detached. I was at home—more than an hour away from the regional campus and two hours from the main campus. It was determined and agreed that putting our efforts and members' bodies on the picket line at the main campus would benefit the union. (I am assuming the union executive committee made this decision.) I did not disagree with this approach. The main campus was a long way for me to travel. The long commute affected my ability and willingness to picket. The union expected me and other faculty to picket for a specific number of hours (estimating 4-8 hours). I did not—could not—meet the union's expectations. It was simply too expensive for me to travel to Dayton and back. I had more pressing expenses at home.

Balanoff (1985) spoke of solidarity committees, describing them as tools for communication. Having strike headquarters in a hotel across from the main campus not only provided proximity to the picket line but also reinforced the existential principles of the union. Fowler et al. (2009) suggested that higher levels of union involvement reduced anxiety and improved mental health. This activity appeared to be confirmed as the strikers seemed rejuvenated by having headquarters across the main campus. Having headquarters across from the main campus also contributed to a "wow" factor. The scene? Faculty members mingled. Tables were set up on the left side of the room in a semicircle and held a plethora of food–comfort food. (I remember because I tried to limit my carbs, and I could barely find any food that met my nutritional needs.) On the right side, tables for eating and conversation were set up. All the supplies were on the back wall opposite the entrance door. The space created a sense of consciousness and a safe place for strikers to vent. Speeches were made, but because I was two hours away, I was not present for them. However, nothing like this happened at the regional campus, and union members at the regional campus felt left behind.

Factors That Led to Crossing a Picket Line

Coercive Power Comes into Play

Three days before the strike ended, the administration threatened to cancel classes. Faculty would not be paid until the beginning of the 2019 fall semester. Some colleagues and I perceived this as an example of the use of coercive power. Raven and French (1958) point to coercive power as having, or the illusion of having, the ability to threaten and punish. The administration's power to cancel the semester could be interpreted as a punishment. Coercive power can result in conforming to avoid punishment (Raven & French, 1958). Strikers conform to the threat to avoid the complete loss of financial stability. Coercive power can also lead to a deterioration of relationships (Yeung et al., 2008). I am not suggesting that the faculty was under the illusion that the administration would meet all the union demands. However, the administration's response was surprising and severe. The use of coercive power at the regional campus affected faculty solidarity and resulted in the majority of faculty at the regional campus crossing the picket line. Even though the faculty understood the union's cause, concerns such as family, finances, and students superseded that cause.

Several faculty members wanted to return to work during the strike. At this small, regional campus, the solidarity of faculty along with coercive power may have forced more faculty to return to work than would have otherwise wanted to. I am not sure this was the response that was experienced at the main campus. I was removed from the main campus experience. I did not hear of any mass exodus to return to work at the main campus. However, I did hear that the main campus faculty were unhappy with the administration placing a hiring ad for adjuncts. After the strike, I was told that the administration could not do what they suggested, but I did not know. The union, the executive committee, was not there to let us know. Either a real threat or suggested illusion of a threat, many at Lake Campus, including me, took it as a threat. I think many at the Lake Campus also saw this as an excuse to go back to work because the strike had been longer than suggested before it all began. I would have been willing to go all the way, but for this.

The Dilemma: An Autoethnographic Narrative

As a Canadian, I understand striking and strike culture. I have supported unions and their ability to bargain and strike. With its narrative, the union tried to persuade union members to join the strike, emphasizing solidarity more than the issues. I believed in the cause—the issues in dispute. But the urge to strike weighed on me. I was the primary source of financial support for my family. Strike pay would have addressed some of the financial burdens of the strike for my family and me. But in reality, how much strike pay could they have provided? It would not have been enough to counter the loss of pay, but at least to acknowledge the sacrifice. However, when

I found that there would be no strike pay, I was nervous. Any threat to my faculty position is a threat to my family. Suddenly, the importance of striking as a principle was at odds with my ability to support my family.

The strike literature featured only a few research studies that explored the mental health of strikers. Financial stability is a mental health issue. Instability creates anxiety and stress. Do I fight for the union's principles or for my family? The dilemma caused fear, anger, and uncertainty. I canceled my son's birthday party. I was angry. How dare the union and administration put me in this position? I was angry at the administration for not coming to the table to compromise, and I was angry at the union for telling me it would be short. Would I have a job after the strike ended? Job certainty was a concern. I thought I could lose it. The union did not appear to consider these factors. If it did, they were not relayed to other members and me. I did not see a mental health worker or services at the forefront of taking care of the strikers. The reality is that my life involves more than the union, and the union does not drive my decision-making.

There were added personal pressures. I was caregiving for my parents from a distance. Every two to three weeks, my family and I traveled to Windsor and Chatham, Ontario, Canada, to visit my parents. My dad had just sold his house, and I oversaw his transition to a retirement home. Meanwhile, my mom was in a long-term care facility. I needed to tend to her too. The money spent negotiating all aspects of caregiving was taxing, and a strike would represent an additional personal and financial blow. Despite this, I decided to go on strike for union solidarity, work conditions, academic freedom, and the ability to bargain. All of this with a hint of anxiety and fear.

The Strike Begins

The strike began the day after Martin Luther King, Jr., (MLK) Day, which is fitting, as MLK represented solidarity and social justice. I dropped off my kids at school, then made my daily 75-minute commute to the campus to join my striking colleagues. We stood in front of the regional campus sign, close to the main road. It was a cold day—very cold. In fact, throughout the strike, the weather played a key role in this strike. When the weather was bad, union member participation was in doubt. Fortunately, on these days, picket days were canceled due to the weather because the administration canceled classes. Oddly, the weather benefited the union and the administration. The union did not have to make members picket in harsh weather or worry about a poor faculty turnout. Meanwhile, the administration did not have to worry about picketers and managing course coverage. Initially, I felt the solidarity between the union and its

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members. On Day One, I was okay. However, it was the first day of what would become an almost three-week strike. Apprehension would soon follow.

Principle Meets Reality

I was at home when I received an urgent message from a colleague regarding a meeting in Celina. Was the meeting sanctioned by the union? I am unsure how to define this meeting because I am unsure how it came about. I felt removed from this too. Regardless, I could not attend, so did it matter to me at that point? The union was not present for my colleagues and me at the regional campus. As I could not attend, I asked a colleague that was there if there was union executive representation. There was none. The liaisons were there, but they did not have the clout of the union executives. It sounded like fear took hold, as it did for me. It made me feel as though we at the regional campus were irrelevant. My sacrifice was insignificant. Why would I want to do anything for the union again? Most importantly, after the strike, I found out that the administration could not do what they threatened. How was I supposed to know? I was not versed in all these intricacies, and I was scared of losing my job. Again, where were they? I may even blame them a bit for having to cross "the picket line." I needed the boost, the solidarity, and it was not present.

At the meeting in Celina, those attending had heard that the administration suggested that if faculty members did not return to work, their classes for the rest of the semester and summer would be canceled. My greatest concern was that if that happened, I—and by extension, my family—would have no money coming in until the 2019 fall semester. This ultimatum was presented to the main campus the next day. To this day, I am still not sure how this information was released to us. My husband and I were concerned. We did not know whether the administration would follow through with this threat. Even if the threat was a ruse, we could not take this kind of risk. We were afraid that not having money for that length of time would devastate us financially. Did I believe that the administration at the regional campus would follow through on the threat? I did not know, but a few hours later, a key phone call cemented my decision: My husband and I decided that I needed to return to work for the financial security of our family. I felt awful —guilty for not continuing to strike. However, due to the use of coercive power by the administration and misleading expectations set by the union, I crossed the picket line.

Given these two obstacles, I was forced to put my principles aside and meet my family obligations. To this day, I still regret going back. I went back on Thursday, and the strike ended on Sunday. Four days. It was disheartening. It was demoralizing. I felt that they made me go back. I think this was the biggest issue; I was made to go back. I was forced.

What Did the Strike Accomplish?

Ultimately, the negotiated contract was extended to 2023. Merit pay, non-tenure eligible (NTE) promotion, and job security remained the same, language ensured the right to negotiate health care, furlough days were limited to one a semester, summer teaching rights were the same but with less pay, and promotion raises were also the same as the 2014-2017 CBA. During my discussions with Lake Campus colleagues, faculty members appeared to view the three-week strike as having gained nothing, arguing that the issues could have been resolved without a strike —or at least within the first week. I think it was important to strike even though it seems nothing was accomplished and even though I had experienced mental health fatigue. My pay was not reimbursed. The pay was lost. The semester was not extended; therefore, the faculty had to "fit" what was lost in teaching in the remainder of the semester.

As I write this autoethnography, the end of the 2023 contract is approaching, and speculation has already begun about union negotiations. I share the concern. Will the faculty be willing to go on strike again? Will the administration risk another strike and potentially harm WSU's reputation? Regardless, I still could not afford to go on strike.

Interestingly, and beyond the scope of this reflexive narrative, my husband may also be striking in the coming year. However, we have discussed his ability to strike and my inability to strike. I am still the main income earner. Striking appears to be a privilege.

Discussion

The 2019 WSU faculty strike has left a lasting impression on me and had a great impact on my work environment. I was relieved when the contract was finally settled. I was pleased not to be concerned with contract negotiations until 2023. However, 2023 is around the corner, and I am again concerned. I do not believe that the university can survive another strike. I hope the union and administration understand this. Since the union has gone on strike before, there is a high probability that it will happen again. This will again lead to discord among union members. During the last strike, relationships between faculty who went on strike and those who did not were strained—even hostile. Fortunately, the tension was short-lived, at least at the Lake Campus. Relationships between those who went on strike and those who did not have softened but have not been forgotten. The solidarity of the striking community remains intact, but because I do not live in the community, I still feel isolated.

As a union member facing another contract negotiation in 2023, I again feel anxious and nervous. I hope the union and administration can resolve any disagreements in future contracts, though I have doubts about the administration's willingness to negotiate in good faith. I am not

sure if I will strike again. I still cannot financially afford to strike, nor do I want to feel the anxiousness and fear again. In addition, it still feels like the union is largely absent from the regional campus. I continue to organize union socials, but this is the only connection I have any more with the union. The union's efforts to build solidarity and connection at the regional level seem to be gone. Actually, they are non-existent. The Lake Campus has an identity that differs from the main campus. The union needs to keep this in mind for future support. Regardless, I have contemplated leaving higher education because of strike-related job uncertainty. Since this strike, I have seen other institutions strike, and it nerves me.

The most important factor that has increased my anxiety is KBOR suspending tenure in the Georgia system. I understand this is within Kansas but it does not suggest it could not happen somewhere else. At first, the WSU administration had mentioned tenure also. My old institution released several tenured professors. In addition, WSU culled approximately 100 faculty of various ranks. Higher education and its faculty seem to be under attack. And administration seems to think that we can provide the best education with the least number of faculty. It reminds me of working at the Home Depot years ago, where the goal was to provide great customer service with the least number of workers. It did not work then, and it does not work now. Therefore, I still see my position as tenuous.

Upon reflection, as a pro-union advocate, my principles were challenged. The use of coercive power benefited those who implemented it. The threat, as I refer to it, was to my family. As my family's primary wage earner, the threat of not having an income for approximately five and a half months would have been devastating. At the time, I had no option but to eventually cross the picket line. Again, my family will win all the time. However, it is the mental health of the striker that needs to be further explored. In addition, intersectional issues of gender, race, and socioeconomic status need further exploration.

What are the lessons learned that would allow others in my position to avoid this dilemma? First, there must be a strike fund. For me, the biggest threat was my family's financial stability. This threat was used as an effective coercive tool that proved detrimental to the faculty, especially at the regional campus. A strike fund would create leverage for the union and its members to endure longer and harsher bargaining processes. From a mental health perspective, it could let the striker feel appreciated, at the very least. Second, the union must be forthcoming with its members. Though I wanted to hear that the strike may last only two to three days, the reality of it lasting longer should have been addressed. This lack of connection may have contributed to a feeling of abandonment, which in turn may have led many union members at the regional campus to return to work before the strike ended. Third, a physical union presence must exist at the regional campus. Though the solidarity committees were effective, they were located

only on the main campus. The union headquarters was the base for solidarity building. The union would benefit from having a stronger presence at the Lake Campus, not just when they need it. Lastly, strikers' intersectional lived realities should be acknowledged as such by unions. The union and its striking members must consider the stress and anxiety presented by the strike and the push/pull between ideals and reality.

Limitations and Future Research

This autoethnographic essay presents a nuanced experience of an academic strike. Although it is limited, it provides avenues for future examination. The intersection of striker concerns should be further explored with intensive interviewing during all strike stages. The type of internal struggle my union colleagues and I experienced in deciding to return before the strike ended needs further research. Of note, I mention my caregiving as an issue of anxiety and concern throughout the strike. Because caregiving is gendered, future research should examine the gendered strike experience.

Is striking a privilege rather than a right? Exploring this concept should be considered for future research. Many factors play into an individual's decision-making process, which needs to be explored. There is also a distinction between solidarity and cause. The solidarity, comradery, and community that can be created and enjoyed are significant and useful tools for the union. However, the cause—disputed issues—may not be enough to bring union members to the picket line. This is especially relevant when strikers' lived realities are more than the "cause." As academia continues to be challenged, strikes may occur more frequently. Research must continue to ensure that academic unions and strikes are successful.

Factors That Led to Crossing a Picket Line

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