

Hold That Line

Time was when working men and women, liberals and radicals of all persuasions, held one rule sacred and inviolable: Never cross a picket line. It wasn't a precept that required discussion or debate. It made no difference which union was on strike, or what it was demanding. Good people didn't cross picket lines. Ever.

Once we learned that rule, we stayed with it. Our politics might have changed, or we might have drifted away from activism, but the picket line remained sacrosanct. Honoring a picket line was a matter of principle, and the principle was absolute and immutable.

Not long ago, I asked a wealthy friend why he continues to respect picket lines that are clearly at odds with his class interests. "I don't know," he replied. "I guess it's because I was brought up that way. My father was a member of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers...."

That's how it was with many millions of us. We or our parents or our grandparents had taken part in the needle-trade strikes, the steel and coal battles, the hard-rock mine struggles, the sit-down strikes in the auto and rubber industries, the bitter confrontations with police or national guardsmen in Minneapolis, Toledo, San Francisco. And even if we or our families were not directly involved, we had heard and read about pickets being beaten, jailed, some-

times killed. Honoring a picket line was the least we could do.

It still is. Observing the rule never to cross a labor picket line is, it seems to me, as important now as it was a couple of generations ago—a minimal show of solidarity with those who are struggling to achieve a better life or a better world. And the rule should allow no exceptions; our observance must be uniform, not selective. It's a matter of principle, of social philosophy. Whether we admire a particular union or a particular strike is beside the point; the *cause* is just and deserves our support.

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During the years of protest against U.S. military involvement in Vietnam, I once arranged a television appearance for a young woman, a dedicated peace activist. At the entrance to the station, we encountered a picket line of striking technicians. "Too bad," I said to my young friend. "This is one TV show we'll have to miss." And I started to walk away.

But she refused to leave with me. "Like hell I'll miss this show," she said. "Those union bastards are our enemies." She cited a recent incident: In New York City, a group of construction workers—hard hats—had assaulted antiwar demonstrators. "Why should I care about them?" she asked.

I argued that the tactics the Government was using against us in the peace movement—arrests, injunctions, official and unofficial violence—had been used for generations against the labor movement. I tried to instill in her a sense of solidarity, a feeling for fellow human beings who were also underdogs, who were also attempting to right societal wrongs. It was all in vain. She walked through the picket line and taped the broadcast.