“It tears the heart right out of you”: Memories of Striker Replacement at International Paper Company in De Pere, Wisconsin, 1987–88

by Timothy J. Minchin

Abstract In the summer of 1987, more than 370 workers at Nicolet Paper Company in De Pere, Wisconsin, walked out on strike after refusing to agree to a wide range of concessions demanded by International Paper Company (IP), Nicolet's parent company. Within a few weeks, however, IP had permanently replaced the strikers, a tactic that became increasingly common in the 1980s. The author uses oral history interviews to provide a valuable, unique insight into the effects of the permanent replacement tactic, which bitterly divided the small community and left workers with psychological scars that were all too apparent more than a decade later. As the Nicolet workers were part of a broader showdown between IP and the United Paperworkers’ International Union, the article also helps to illuminate the history of a major labor dispute of the 1980s.

On June 8, 1987, more than 370 workers in the small community of De Pere, Wisconsin walked off their jobs at Nicolet Paper Company, a division of the giant International Paper Company (IP). In the same week, workers at large IP mills in Lock Haven, Pennsylvania and Jay, Maine also struck. By encouraging

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workers to walk out together, the United Paperworkers International Union (UPIU) hoped to push IP to abandon its attempts to inflict concessionary contracts on their members. The company, however, failed to give way; within a week of the walkouts, executives announced that they would run their mills and started to hire permanent replacements. The hiring of more than 2,200 replacements eventually forced the union to abandon the walkout in October 1988, ending an acrimonious and high-profile dispute. The strike provides insight into the bitterness caused by labor disputes in small communities, a bitterness exacerbated by the hiring of permanent replacements. More than twelve years later, former strikers vividly recalled the dispute and described the lasting impact it had made on their lives. "It's twelve years ago and it's going to be a sore spot with me for the rest of my life," recalled Jerry Herwald, who was the president of the local union at the time of the strike. "I think that International Paper with their big money hurt a lot of loyal workers. Like I said, we had people there with forty-one, forty-two, forty-four years of seniority and this company put them out of a job and treated them like dirt."\(^1\)

The IP strike was typical of many disputes that occurred in the Reagan era. During the 1980s and 1990s, many corporations reacted to strikes by hiring permanent replacements, a clear departure from the temporary substitutes that management had traditionally turned to in previous decades. Unlike temporary replacements, who left at the end of a strike, permanent replacements were assured of strikers' jobs. After the strike, the law gave strikers the right to return to their old positions, but only if replacements left them.\(^2\) Management in the 1980s met unions

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\(^1\)Jerry Herwald, interview by author, August 9, 1999, Green Bay, Wisconsin. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed by the author. Copies of the tapes and transcripts are in the author's possession.

\(^2\)Employers' right to hire permanent replacements originated in the Mackay Radio v. National Labor Relations Board Supreme Court decision of 1938. The decision, while ordering that several workers be reinstated in this particular instance, volunteered language in its decision that it is not an unfair labor practice to permanently replace striking workers. Prior to the 1980s, however, the use of permanent replacements was very rare and was mainly limited to smaller companies not susceptible to widespread public pressure. The position of unions was slightly strengthened in the late 1960s when the NLRB ruled in the Laidlaw case that economic strikers who are permanently replaced are, after the end of the dispute, entitled to reinstatement.
head on and hired permanent replacements in a series of high-profile disputes, including the steelworkers' battle against Phelps Dodge in 1983–84, the lengthy strike against Hormel by the United Food and Commercial Workers in 1985–86, and the strike at Eastern Airlines in 1989. The 1980s, Labor Secretary Robert Reich told a 1993 Congressional Hearing, was "a decade characterized by a wave of labor disputes in which thousands of employees lost their jobs after they engaged in completely lawful economic strikes." Labor leaders argued that the hiring of permanent replacements was encouraged by Ronald Reagan's dismissal of 13,000 striking air traffic controllers in the summer of 1981. The hiring of replacements, unions argued, helped to destroy the right to strike and contributed to the decline of organized labor in the 1980s. Management, however, insisted that prohibiting companies from hiring permanent replacements would give unions too much power. What was beyond dispute, however, was that the 1980s was a decade of rapid decline for U.S. unions. In the 1980s, the number of workers belonging to unions fell precipitously from 23% of the workforce in 1980 to 16.1% in 1991. The experience of the De Pere workers was representative of a decade that the Boston Globe succinctly termed "a disaster for the labor


5 For an overview of these arguments, see U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Labor and Human Resources, Prohibiting Discrimination Against Economic Strikers, Hearings, 102nd Cong., 1st sess., 125–127; U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Economic and Educational Opportunities, Hearings on Executive Order 12954 and H.R. 1176, To Nullify the Executive Order Prohibiting Federal Contracts with Companies that Hire Permanent Replacements for Striking Workers, 104th Cong., 1st sess., 77–87.
movement.” A growing body of literature has begun to examine recent strikes and the problems faced by organized labor since the early 1980s. Given the recent time frame, however, many areas remain unexplored, including the experience of the De Pere workers. Oral history provides a unique insight into the thoughts and feelings of the former strikers, complementing well the quantitative studies on permanent replacement that have been carried out by industrial relations scholars, lawyers, and economists.

At the time of the strike, Nicolet Paper Company was the largest employer in De Pere, a community on the edge of Green Bay with a population of around 15,000. A two-machine mill,

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initially called the Shattuck and Babcock Company, was built on the banks of the Fox River in 1892. The mill produced high quality papers until reduced demand compelled the owners to sell the mill in 1899. The new owners, the American Writing Paper Company, struggled to operate the mill profitably, and had to close it temporarily in 1922. In 1927, a group of Wisconsin industrialists bought the mill and re-named it Nicolet Paper Company, a name derived from a European explorer who visited the Fox River Valley in the seventeenth century. In the mid-1950s, Philip Morris took over the mill, and ran it until selling out to the Hammermill Paper Company in 1985. The following year, International Paper Company, the largest paper company in the world, absorbed Hammermill.\textsuperscript{11}

Prior to the 1930s, most of Wisconsin’s paper industry operated on an open-shop basis. Despite sporadic efforts to improve conditions, workers struggled to establish stable unions; by the late 1920s, indeed, fewer than 10 percent of the industry’s workers were organized. During the 1930s and 1940s, decades in which organized labor made great strides across the United States, unions successfully organized the vast majority of Wisconsin’s paper mills.\textsuperscript{12} Union leaders attributed these gains to the protection provided by the newly-established National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). As one organizer wrote in 1940, “The National Labor Relations Board has been of great help to our organization here in Wisconsin.”\textsuperscript{13} By the end of World War II, the vast majority of mills had been organized by either the International Brotherhood of Pulp, Sulphite, and Paper Mill Workers (IBPSPMW) or the smaller United Papermakers and Paperworkers (UPP). These unions consolidated their position in the immediate postwar years, using their bargaining power to secure good pay and benefits for their members.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{13} Quoted in Zieger, Rebuilding the Pulp and Paper Workers’ Union, 98.
\textsuperscript{14} The IBPSPMW was the largest union in the paper industry, as it represented both skilled and unskilled workers, whereas the UPP was restricted to skilled machine operators. In 1972, the IBPSPMW and the UPP merged to form the UPIU.
Unionization came to the Nicolet workers later than to most Wisconsin paper workers; it was over three years after World War II before the IBPSIWMW secured bargaining rights at Nicolet.\textsuperscript{15} Local union officials quickly established a solid bargaining relationship with Philip Morris, and workers made steady gains in pay and benefits between the 1940s and 1970s, reflecting the economic progress that many unions made at the bargaining table in these years.\textsuperscript{16} Ken Keiler, hired at the mill in 1971, recalled that, “Philip Morris was a good company to work for. They had a good attitude towards their workers.”\textsuperscript{17} Workers took pride in the fact that turnover at the mill was low and that labor disputes were rare.\textsuperscript{18}

Throughout the postwar era, the high levels of pay available in the paper industry attracted workers, even though the jobs usually involved shift work and exposure to heat and noise. Workers who grew up in De Pere in the 1950s and 1960s recalled that jobs in the mill were highly-prized. “You had to know somebody to get into these jobs,” recalled one former striker. As paper mill jobs were highly-sought-after, turnover at Nicolet was traditionally low. At the time of the strike, indeed, the average worker had twenty years seniority and was over forty years old.\textsuperscript{19} As was traditional in the paper industry, the vast majority of the Nicolet workers were men. Many were related to other workers, a factor that helped build solidarity when the strike occurred, but which also increased the hatred and bitterness when strikers crossed the picket line. As union representative Dan Janssen, Sr., a De Pere native, reflected, “That Nicolet group was made up of fathers and grandfathers and sons and cousins. To get a job, until the last few years, to get a job at Nicolet was

\textsuperscript{15}The UPIU was formed in 1972 following the merger of two separate unions—the International Brotherhood of Pulp, Sulphite, and Paper Mill Workers and the United Papermakers and Paperworkers.

\textsuperscript{16}Dan Janssen, Sr., interview by the author, August 10, 1999, De Pere, Wisconsin.

\textsuperscript{17}Ken Keiler, interview by the author, August 11, 1999, De Pere, Wisconsin.

\textsuperscript{18}A 1982 brochure published by the city even boasted that “Industries in De Pere have had very few work stoppages due to employee strikes. Absenteeism and worker turnover is low, and area manufacturers and businesses find the quality and productivity of the work force much superior to that of other regions of the United States.” “De Pere, Wisconsin: Business Industrial Parks,” 1982 Brochure, De Pere Public Library, De Pere.

\textsuperscript{19}Ken Keiler, interview by the author, August 11, 1999, De Pere, Wisconsin.
to have somebody on the inside. You didn’t get a job there without having someone on the inside, so it was all friends and relatives and neighbors, and that’s what worked in there, just the regular De Pere people.”

Within a year of IP buying the mill, workers and management were locked into a bitter labor dispute. The central issue in the strike was the company’s demands for the elimination of premium pay for working on Sundays. Like most paperworkers, Nicolet workers earned double-time on Sundays, a benefit that the company offered in 1967 in order to compensate their employees for working on the traditional day of rest. In 1984, however, IP managers decided to eliminate Sunday premium pay in all their mills, arguing that the move was necessary in order to meet increasing foreign competition and improve the long-term competitive position of the company. Sunday premium, human resources director James W. Gilliland explained in 1989, was seen as a “luxury” because it required the company to pay a worker extra to produce paper that was worth no more: “An employee essentially does the same thing on Sunday that he does on Tuesday or Thursday or any other day of the week, provided it is a regularly-scheduled day, and, of course, in our paper mills it always is because they run around the clock. So we decided that Sunday premium was a reasonable target to achieve a significant cost reduction at the collective bargaining table.”

Following this decision, IP management began to negotiate the elimination of Sunday premium pay at mills across the United States, arousing the concern of the UPIU, who represented workers in most IP mills. On March 21, 1987, conflict with the union escalated when IP locked out over 1,200 workers at its mill in Mobile, Alabama after they refused to agree to a contract that included the elimination of Sunday premium. In April 1987, at a meeting of the union’s International Paper Company Council in Jacksonville, Florida, local union representatives decided to embark on an all-out effort to stop the

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20 Dan Janssen, Sr., interview by the author, August 10, 1999, De Pere, Wisconsin.
company's concessionary bargaining and uphold Sunday premium pay. At a meeting in Nashville on May 19, representatives from Jay, Maine, Lock Haven, Pennsylvania, and De Pere, all locations with contracts that were about to expire, met with the Mobile workers and agreed to enter into a joint voting pool that decreed that no one local would accept a contract until a majority of the entire pool voted in favor. Each local agreed not to sign any contract that included the elimination of premium pay. When IP refused to drop its demand for the elimination of premium pay, workers at the three mills struck.22

While premium pay was certainly important to De Pere workers, most of them saw the dispute in much broader terms. The company indeed demanded many other concessions, including the right to contract out jobs usually held by union workers, cuts in overtime pay, and changes to the grievance procedure.23 The De Pere workers were conscious that IP, like many companies at the time, was demanding major give-backs from their workers and they therefore felt that they were fighting to uphold the labor standards of all paper workers. "We weren't only fighting for Lock Haven, Jay, Maine, Mobile, and De Pere," recalled Jerry Herwald, "we were fighting for all paperworkers."24 Between 1985 and 1987, IP's profits increased from $133 million to $407 million, and workers used these profits to argue that the company's concessions were unjustified. As striker Dennis Aerts explained in one letter: "This company, with its union busting tactics and unfair negotiations, has tried to destroy their striking employees. At a time when this company is reaping huge profits and giving their top corporate management huge wage increases they are trying to destroy their employees and the fine work ethic that these people have developed over the years."25

23 "Nicolet strike includes 24 locally negotiable issues," Green Bay Press-Gazette, July 19, 1987, clipping in Dennis and Betty Aerts Papers. (Held by Dennis and Betty Aerts, De Pere, Wisconsin, hereinafter cited as Aerts Papers.)
24 Jerry Herwald, interview by the author, August 9, 1999, Green Bay, Wisconsin.
Managers, however, argued that they needed the concessions in order to ensure the long-term future viability of the company. In a meeting with UPIU leaders in February 1987, IP CEO John Georges insisted that the company would not be changing its position because it needed to change its cost structure in order to remain competitive on a “long-term basis.” Georges repeatedly asserted that increased foreign competition left the company with no choice but to seek concessions.\(^{26}\) Prior to the 1980s, IP executives asserted, the absence of overseas competition had allowed the company to grant generous wages and fringe benefits to its workers. All large U.S. paper companies were unionized and followed the wage pattern set by IP, passing on the increased costs to their customers. As Jim Gilliland noted, “Whatever the union asked for, within reason, we granted because we knew we could pass it on to the customer, and we did so because there was no competition for domestically-produced paper goods in this country.”\(^{27}\) In the 1980s, however, foreign competition produced “a fundamental change in the way IP’s markets operated.” With foreign-made paper being sold below IP’s cost, the problem of overseas competition quickly became, in the words of another IP executive, the “number one issue” facing the paper-making giant.\(^{28}\)

The company also emphasized that its decision to cut costs affected all of its operations, not just its production workforce. It claimed that salaried workers had already had their pay and benefits slashed as the company strove for profitability. Refuting the union’s argument that workers were being made to bear an unfair burden of the cuts, IP pictured the concessions as part of a broad company strategy. As an IP press statement put it, “The company is taking necessary steps across the board to compete— reduction in energy costs, headcount reductions in salaried/ administrative employees, etc. What is being done in labor costs


simply is part of this overall effort. We cannot justify paying costs that do not relate to being competitive."

Within days of the beginning of the strike, Nicolet managers announced that they would hire permanent replacements to operate the mill. In all three locations, the company justified the move as necessary to fulfil its customer commitments, although many strikers saw it as a way of frightening them back to work. Local manager Joseph G. Bergomi, for example, justified the hiring of permanent replacements on the grounds of business necessity. "When the union’s leadership informed us that it intended to strike," declared Bergomi, "we informed those leaders that we would hire permanent replacements if the local’s members walked off their jobs. We needed to protect our customers and at the same time make sure that we could keep them by supplying them with paper."

The company recruited replacement workers through a series of advertisements placed in newspapers across Wisconsin, offering new workers “competitive wage rates” ranging from $10.05 to $13.89 an hour, together with an extensive benefit package that included comprehensive health insurance, paid holidays, and an attractive pension. The company received an overwhelming response, processing more than 1,000 applicants in the first week, three times the total number of jobs in the mill. Within two months, an entirely new workforce had been hired.

During much of the strike the replacement workers, despite generating a great deal of controversy, were rather anonymous figures. They rushed in and out of the gates every day, but most offered few clues as to what motivated them. As one reporter

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noted, the new workers were “mainly shadowy figures flitting in and out of the mill in cars with the windows rolled up.”34 Even after more than a decade, former replacements remained reluctant to discuss the strike. During the dispute, however, several replacement workers did explain their position to the local press, although they usually remained anonymous. From these accounts, it is clear that the economic benefits had attracted many to apply. As one De Pere replacement typically explained, the jobs at Nicolet offered “a chance to get ahead.” The worker explained that the jobs at Nicolet offered, “a tremendous opportunity for people who wanted to change their fields.”35 A few replacements expressed sympathy for the union but still justified their action on the grounds of economic necessity. “You really don’t want to do it,” claimed one, “but I need a job as bad as anyone. I’ve got a car that’s falling apart and a 15-month-old daughter I need to support.”36 Others, however, were critical of the strikers, claiming that they had surrendered good-paying jobs by walking out. Allan Roffers, one of the few replacement workers to speak publicly, noted defiantly: “I’ve got a family to feed, too. They had their chance to work and they gave it up. They let their jobs go. We didn’t steal it.”37 Replacement workers in all three locations repeatedly asserted that strikers had voluntarily vacated their jobs.38

The economic context of the 1980s is crucial in explaining IP’s success at recruiting replacements. Between 1981 and 1991, over 1.8 million manufacturing jobs were eliminated nationwide, creating what labor lawyer Thomas Geoghegan termed, “a pool

38 See, for example, Glen Chase, “Replacements find opportunity, troubles,” *Lewiston Daily Sun*, June 12, 1988, clipping in Local 14 Clipping File, Local 14 Papers.
of scabs as big as Lake Michigan." 39 As IP officials acknowledged, at all three plants the company received so many applicants because it was offering the kind of well-paid industrial positions that were in short supply in the 1980s. These jobs attracted workers from a wide radius; at Nicolet, many commuted from distant communities in northern Wisconsin where there was little well-paid manufacturing work available. 40 A substantial minority of replacement workers came from outside Wisconsin, especially as IP hired BE&K, a non-union contractor based in Birmingham, Alabama, to run maintenance jobs in all three struck plants. Most of BE&K’s workers were drawn from the southern states and lived in a “man-camp” inside the Nicolet complex during the strike. As the strike wore on and the picket-line became less intense, the man-camp was disbanded and BE&K workers took rented accommodations outside the mill. Many BE&K workers had worked during strikes before and they played an important role in re-establishing production at the Nicolet mill in the early stages of the strike. 41

From the very beginning, the company and union differed greatly in their view of the replacement workers. Company officials repeatedly insisted that their new employees were permanent, arguing that they had made a commitment to them that they had a moral duty to fulfill. In April 1988, for example, David Oskin, IP’s vice-president of human resources, typically asserted that many replacements workers, “have endured harassment and other attempts to intimidate. To turn our backs on these individuals would be unconscionable.”42 By December 1987, IP spokesman Glenn Schilling claimed that with the mill operating well, the strike was effectively over. He suggested that it was, “time for the strikers to get on with their lives and get new jobs.”43

Union members, however, refused to concede, arguing that only they could run the plant effectively. These differences consistently prevented a settlement to the strike, as the company repeatedly refused union demands for the removal of the replacements.44

The hiring of replacements exerted enormous psychological stress on the strikers and their families. In interviews, former strikers vividly recalled their anger and bitterness as they stood on the picket line each day and watched other people working their jobs. Bob Prall described his feelings while on the picket line simply as “hate.” Ken Keiler admitted that he was unable to control his anger. “It was very emotional, I did some dumb things, as a lot of people did,” he acknowledged. “It just intensified the feelings. The picket lines was an area where you watched somebody come through . . . you’ve just been replaced, locked out of a job that’s always supported your family and somebody goes through smiling at you and waving a paycheck, you do what you can to try to get even, you lash out.”45 Other strikers also saw their loss of control as a reflection of the intensity of the situation and the provocation provided by many replacement workers. Jim Maddix, who was hired at the mill in 1969, related his feelings when he saw replacement workers entering the mill: “The mental anguish that you go through every day and then you go and stand on that strike line and you just get so worked up, so fired up, I mean I was just beet red and the cops are over by me because I’m pushing through that line. I’m pushing my limits as much as I could . . . especially when the cars started leaving and they’re laughing, they’re coming through and they’re laughing at you and giving you the bird. From here to there, they’re right there coming by you in a car and there’s a cop standing there and the cops are protecting them, the cops are protecting them. You sit there and you work all these years on your job to have these ass holes come in that don’t have one iota of what the hell is going on.”46

The strong emotions aroused at the picket line meant that

45 Ken Keiler, interview by the author, August 11, 1999, De Pere, Wisconsin.
46 Jim Maddix, interview by the author, August 9, 1999, De Pere, Wisconsin.
the dispute threatened to become violent. As early as July 1987, IP's Glenn Schilling claimed that “a significant amount of violence” had been perpetrated by the union on the picket line. Schilling’s view is partially supported by De Pere police, who reported that a series of violent incidents had occurred near the plant. Replacement workers also complained that their homes and vehicles were vandalized. Although local union leaders tried to keep their members’ tempers under control, some strikers admitted to chasing replacements, attempting to run them off the road, and vandalizing their property.

The experience of losing their jobs also made many strikers feel depressed and disillusioned. Male strikers, in particular, found it very hard to adjust to life without a job. Many recalled a sense of worthlessness because they were no longer able to work. Bob Brey, who had worked in the mill since 1964, remembered vividly the way that the dispute turned his world upside down: “I can remember coming home the first day of the strike and sitting out in the back yard and saying a prayer, saying, ‘God, please help me keep this house.’ You go into shock, you can’t explain it, your sex life changes, you don’t sleep the same, because men identify so closely with their job. I can remember sitting here on the porch and see my neighbors go off to work and saying, ‘Why don’t I have a job?’” Like many others, Brey responded by throwing himself into union activities as a way of trying to give his life a sense of purpose.

Many other male strikers found it very difficult to adjust to joblessness. Some felt guilty because the dispute caused their wives to work for the first time, eroding their pride in providing for their families. Dan Janssen, Jr., for example, admitted that he found it very difficult to be supported by his wife during the

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51 Bob Brey, interview by the author, August 10, 1999, De Pere, Wisconsin.
walkout: “To be totally dependent on her financially was very difficult for somebody like me, just because of my personal make-up. Being a man that was brought up by a father that always worked and always supported the family, that was kind of a tough thing.”

Both strikers and their wives felt that the stress of being replaced contributed to the high number of divorces that occurred among union members during and after the dispute.

Many former strikers compared losing their jobs to the death of a close relative. Recalling the dispute, even after twelve years, was a very emotional experience for many as they related the loss of their livelihoods. “Losing your job is very much like the death of a close person,” explained Dan Janssen, Jr. “You have to go through the grieving process and I think a lot of people didn’t understand that and didn’t know quite how to handle the grieving process. They had all these feelings inside but didn’t know how to handle them or didn’t know what to do with them . . . nobody knew what to do with that and they’d take it home every day.”

During the strike, many strikers’ wives became very active in the union in order to express their support for their husbands or partners who had been devastated by the loss of their jobs. Wives began to picket with their husbands or instead of them, and they organized a variety of activities to support the strikers, including prayer services, clothing exchanges, and picnics.

Carol Dobesh, for example, became an active union supporter after witnessing how devastated her husband was at the loss of his livelihood. Al Dobesh had started working in the mill as an eighteen year old in 1963 and he struggled to adjust to the loss of his job. “If they weren’t going to allow him to go back into that occupation, he felt like he wasn’t worth anything at that point, so you have to stand behind them,” she reflected.

One of the most active wives, Betty Aerts, described in her

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52 Dan Janssen, Jr., interview by the author, August 11, 1999, De Pere, Wisconsin.
53 Carol Dobesh, interview by the author, August 10, 1999, Green Bay, Wisconsin; Jerry Herwald, interview by the author, August 9, 1999, Green Bay, Wisconsin.
54 Dan Janssen, Jr., interview by the author, August 11, 1999, De Pere, Wisconsin.
56 Carol Dobesh, interview by the author, August 10, 1999, Green Bay, Wisconsin.
personal writing how she gradually was drawn into the strike. "I will always remember June 8, 1987," she wrote, referring to the day the strike began. "It compares to knowing where you were when JFK was assassinated. For the first couple of days I wouldn't even go to the picket line, when I finally went to the line, I wouldn't yell. As I realized what we were fighting for, I got very involved."[57] Aerts recalled that many wives quickly became more vocal than the male strikers: "I think women always have to talk more than men do because men kind of do their thinking inwardly. ... Right from the start the women were really, really into it."[58]

In a series of letters written to the press and to IP executives, Aerts, a bookkeeper at the local Catholic high-school, turned the loyalty of the Nicolet employees to her advantage, arguing that the company was wrong to cast aside workers with long and satisfactory work records. In one letter to IP CEO John Georges, she outlined the employment history of her husband Denny, who had worked at the mill for 24 years. "I would like to give you a brief profile of just one of these workers," she wrote. "His name is Dennis Aerts and he is my husband of 21 years and the father of two daughters, ages 18 and 20. He has worked for Nicolet Paper Co. in De Pere for 24 years, beginning December 19, 1963. In that amount of time ... I can count on one hand the times he has just called in and not come to work because he was ill. He has done his job for this company and worked 8 hours for his 8 hours pay. He has had an exemplary work ethic and was always proud to say he worked for Nicolet Paper. Sadly though, all of that came to an abrupt end on June 8, 1987. By your greed and arrogance, Mr. Georges, you put men on the street who have worked for your company 10–20–25–40 years. By doing this, you've told them they are no good. You have destroyed the work ethic of 3400 workers overall and 370 of these are from Nicolet in De Pere."[59]

Georges never responded directly to Aerts' letter, instead delegating the task to Joseph G. Bergomi. In a detailed letter, Bergomi sympathized with the strikers' plight but insisted that the

[57] Betty Aerts writings, nd, Aerts Papers.
[58] Betty Aerts, interview by the author, August 9, 1999, De Pere, Wisconsin.
union had been given advance warning of the company’s determination to operate if a labor stoppage occurred. He explained that replacing experienced workers such as Denny Aerts “was not an easy decision,” but added that the mill needed to reduce labor costs in order to ensure its long-term viability. “Mills and companies need profits to remain competitive,” he added. “Putting in new equipment to remain competitive is very costly, and profits pay for such investment.”

In public statements, senior IP executives used a variety of other arguments to defend the company’s actions. In testifying before a congressional hearing in 1991, IP general counsel and senior vice-president James P. Melican also expressed regret for the strikers’ fate, but he insisted that the company had to defend itself against the union, which was trying to use pool voting to launch a crippling general strike. The strike “occurred not because of an anti-union animus on the part of the company, or because the company refused to bargain in good faith. . . . [b]ut rather, simply because the union leadership thought the pool voting technique in which it conceived the idea of lining up multiple mills and then being able to strike them all at the same time would bring the company to its knees and miscalculated the economic impact of the strike on the company.”

Helped by the support of their wives, only thirteen De Pere strikers crossed the picket line in the course of the lengthy strike. Several other factors also help to explain the strikers’ determination. Throughout the dispute, many strikers convinced themselves that the replacement workers were inefficient and that it was only a matter of time before the company called for its regular work force again. As one striker typically put it: “We thought we’d be back in no time and they’d be out the door.” Union members also hoped that other IP plants would join in the walkout and force the company to give in. In addition, many Local 6288 members found other jobs soon after the dispute began, thus helping many to meet their most pressing financial commitments. Above all, however, a strong sense of moral

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61 U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Labor and Human Resources, Preventing Replacement of Economic Strikers, 101st Cong., 2nd sess., 124.
purpose, derived from the fact that the company was asking its workers for concessions at a time of record profits, sustained strikers. The fact that IP had just taken over the Nicolet plant also helped workers to fight the company. "It was something I believed in," recalled one former striker, "that they shouldn’t just come and buy the place and kick everybody out and take everything away that we got over the last forty years or sixty years. I don’t feel that’s right. It would be a different story if the company was hurting for money but they weren’t. They are one of the richest companies in the world, as far as I know. They just come in and this is the way we’re going to do it and that’s it." \[64\]

Generous support from unions across the midwest, together with weekly strike benefits of $55 a week from the UPIU, also helped maintain morale. \[65\] The support of organized labor was crucial since strikers received only lukewarm support from the broader community. Strikers complained that the business community failed to back them sufficiently and that much of the population of neighboring Green Bay was indifferent to their plight, dismissing the dispute as "just another strike down the valley." \[66\] One reason for this lack of support was the high wages that paper workers received. Some in the community, indeed, portrayed the strikers as ungrateful and selfish for walking out when they were already well-paid. "You found that a lot of people in the community thought that paper mill workers made more than they should," recalled Carol Dobesh. \[67\] Some strikers and their supporters tried to counteract this hostility by emphasizing that they were church-going "family people," yet they conceded that they were never able to win over public support. \[68\]

De Pere strikers were also disappointed with the lack of support they received from community leaders and politicians.

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64 Anonymous interview by the author, August 11, 1999, De Pere, Wisconsin.
When they wrote letters to their representatives in Congress and the Senate, the responses they received were non-committal. Congressman Toby Roth and Senator Robert W. Kasten, Jr., for example, both expressed their “concern” for the De Pere workers but not their support. Kasten, in a letter that was typical of others, claimed that the strikers raised “some interesting points” that he would keep “in mind.”

A central cause of the strike’s failure was the union’s inability to broaden the dispute to other IP mills. When the three mills struck in the summer of 1987,UPIU leaders intended that other IP mills would join them as their contracts expired. The union’s hopes of extending the dispute, however, evaporated by the fall of 1987 as large mills in Moss Point, Mississippi and Pine Bluff, Arkansas both voted to accept contracts that included the company’s required concessions, such as the elimination of Sunday premium pay. The permanent replacement policy at all three mills was the central reason for the failure of other mills to join in the struggle. Realizing that they would lose their jobs if they joined, other IP workers chose to swallow the concessions instead. As UPIU staffer Willie Stout commented when the strike was called off, “About 20 other mills with contracts coming up for negotiation didn’t want to join the picket lines in solidarity because they feared permanent replacements taking their jobs… [This] was successful in instilling fear at the other mills.”

Unable to extend the strike, the UPIU focused its efforts on a corporate campaign that aimed to exert outside pressure on IP. Heading the campaign was Ray Rogers, the maverick labor activist who had pioneered the use of the corporate campaign during the struggle to organize the J.P. Stevens textile company in the 1970s. Paying particular attention to companies with directors who sat on IP’s board, Rogers encouraged strikers to send many letters to these companies and their workers as part of what he called “divide and conquer at the highest levels of the corporate and financial power structure.” One of the main

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69 Toby Roth to Mr. and Mrs. Dennis Aerts, August 6, 1987; Robert W. Kasten, Jr. to Mr. and Mrs. Dennis Aerts, May 5, 1989; Robert W. Kasten, Jr. to Mr. and Mrs. Dennis Aerts, September 9, 1988, all in Aerts Papers.

70 Stout quoted in “IP union workers criticize leaders,” Mobile Press, October 13, 1988, p. 7B.

71 “Ray Rogers: Workers don’t have to keep losing,” The Progressive, June 1988, p. 27.
targets of the campaign was Avon Products, due to the fact that Stanley Gault sat on the board of both companies. The UPIU distributed flyers urging a boycott of Avon products, arguing that Gault was directly connected to IP’s labor policies. Similar efforts were directed against Coca-Cola, Anheuser Busch, and the Bank of Boston. De Pere strikers threw themselves into these efforts, writing scores of letters that aimed to pressure IP into changing their bargaining position. There is little evidence to indicate that these efforts were successful. Avon CEO Hicks Wauldron, for example, rebuffed union efforts by arguing that his company was a separate and independent operation from IP, an argument repeated by Anheuser-Busch executive August A. Busch, III. The fact that IP was not a brand-name producer also hindered the union’s efforts to exert pressure on them.

With the corporate campaign failing to change IP’s bargaining position, union leaders realized that they needed to assess carefully whether to continue with the strike. On October 8–9, 1988, local union representatives from IP plants met at the UPIU’s headquarters in Nashville and decided to call off the walkout. At the Nashville meeting, some local leaders claimed that the international union pressed them to call off the strike. UPIU leaders, however, argued that the decision was made by local union leaders who realized that other IP locals were not going to join them. Certainly many local leaders felt that there was little to gain by staying out. Jerry Herwald, who attended the meeting, felt that the failure to extend the strike had been critical. Like other Local 6288 members, Herwald singled out IP workers in the South for particular criticism: “A lot of our locals in the South wouldn’t go along with it, they wouldn’t strike. So it left the four of us out there fighting and we fought it to the end, but it would have worked out different if everybody would have jumped in.”

Former strikers expressed mixed feelings about the decision to call off the strike. Some felt angry at the decision; they wanted to fight on and were not ready to surrender. “I was mad

72 Hicks Waldron to Denny Aerts, January 21, 1988, and August A. Busch III to Dennis Aerts, January 4, 1988, both in Aerts Papers.
74 Jerry Herwald, interview by the author, August 9, 1999, Green Bay, Wisconsin.
at our union for calling it off,” recalled Bob Prall. Betty Aerts wrote to UPIU president Wayne Glenn, arguing that international leaders had pushed local union leaders to call off the strike. “[Local] 6288 will always be strong but I don’t know if the International leadership is strong,” she noted defiantly. Other strikers, however, tried to focus their anger on the company rather than the union. Many also felt that the decision to call off the walkout was the right one. “I didn’t necessarily blame the union because it was time and why beat a dead horse,” recalled Ken Keiler. “There was nowhere to go anymore, we weren’t going to win the battle. I don’t think we would have hurt International Paper.”

Very few strikers went back to the mill after the dispute, instead taking a buyout package that gave them a lump-sum payment in return for surrendering their recall rights. Of the 374 original strikers, only 11 returned to Nicolet. Most never entertained the option of going back to the mill because they could not accept having to work next to those who had taken their jobs. Bob Brey summed up how many strikers felt: “I knew I couldn’t work with the scabs. I’d get fired or do something stupid or say something stupid, and I knew that it would eat me up on the inside.” By the time the strike was called off, Local 6288 had already been decertified. On September 14, 1988, a combination of replacement workers and the few ex-union members who had crossed the picket line voted to decertify the local by the overwhelming margin of 316–2. Since 1988, the reluctance of most former strikers to return to Nicolet has meant there has been little chance of the union being reorganized, ensuring that the plant has continued to run on a non-union basis.

More than a decade later, many former strikers had left the

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75 Bob Prall, interview by the author, August 10, 1999, Green Bay, Wisconsin.
78 Jerry Herwald, interview by the author, August 9, 1999, Green Bay, Wisconsin.
79 Bob Brey, interview by the author, August 10, 1999, De Pere, Wisconsin.
paper industry and worked in a wide variety of careers. Dan Janssen, Jr. had completed a business degree at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay after losing his job in the mill and had set up a labor-recruiting agency. Ken Keiler worked as a guard for the state correction service. Jerry Herwald, who found himself out of work in his fifties, had re-trained as a welder after more than thirty years in the paper industry. Other strike veterans, such as Bob Brey, Bob Prall, and Jim Maddix, still worked in the paper industry but at other mills in the Fox River Valley.

Former strikers expressed a wide variety of opinions about the mill. Dan Janssen was glad to have escaped mill work, which he described as “mind-numbing.” Now running a successful business, he had come to regard the strike as a blessing in disguise. Ken Keiler, in contrast, admitted that he missed the camaraderie that had existed in the mill and the satisfaction he had received from solving production problems. “The job I have now,” he reflected, “there’s nothing positive to working in a prison, obviously. You can’t look forward to anything, you can’t come home with very much at all, but when I worked in the mill, there was a lot of days where I would look forward to going in there and solving production problems and you were a part of the operation.” Although some former strikers, like Janssen, are now financially better off than when they worked at Nicolet, others have suffered economically. Workers who took jobs in other paper mills, in particular, have often ended up receiving less pay.81

Although many now worked in different careers, former strikers related that the experience of being replaced had permanently changed the way they felt about their job. “It’s hard to ever become loyal to a company again after something like that happens,” Ken Keiler reflected. “It’s a shame because it tears the heart right out of you. It’s your blood, it’s your bones that was dedicated to it. Whether you want to say it or not, I enjoyed my job and I always took a lot of pride in the mill, being a Nicolet employee. I still have the money clip and some of the

things that were given to me through the years from Nicolet Paper. I still have a lot of good memories about things that we did that were in there. I had a lot of pride in my job. I found out now that I was just like a piece of machinery, when it came time to replace the machinery, we became obsolete, there was no problem in doing it.”

Several of those interviewed admitted that their memories of the strike were so painful that it had been many years before they could even face driving near Nicolet Paper Company. Denny and Betty Aerts, for example, both recalled that for many years they took a lengthy diversion in order to avoid crossing the bridge over the Fox River which passed in front of the mill: “It was a long time before we could drive across the bridge in De Pere. We avoided it for a long time, we couldn’t do it.”

Jim Maddix, who now drove over twenty miles to work in another paper mill, similarly reflected that, “It took three years before I could go across the bridge to the east side without getting red in the face because I’d have to go by the mill. I’d just get so wound up it took me three years before I could stop doing that. I stopped going.”

Throughout the 1990s, Ken Keiler crossed the Fox River bridge every day on his way to work in his new job with the state prison service. He felt that the strike had brought big changes to De Pere. Prior to the dispute, most Nicolet workers had lived in the town but now a new workforce was drawn from a much wider radius and the old workforce had scattered. “I have to cross that bridge quite often, pretty near every day I go across that bridge, and whereas I used to drive in that parking-lot every day and go to work, now I see other people driving in there. Whereas De Pere was mainly a community of Nicolet employees, we tended to group up quite strongly here, a lot have moved out of the area, a lot of replacement workers moved into the area. I personally can never forget. I would never be friends with anybody that crossed that line prior to when we called off the strike.”

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62 Ken Keiler, interview by the author, August 11, 1999, De Pere, Wisconsin.
63 Betty Aerts, interview by the author, August 9, 1999, De Pere, Wisconsin.
64 Jim Maddix, interview by the author, August 9, 1999, De Pere, Wisconsin.
65 Ken Keiler, interview by the author, August 11, 1999, De Pere, Wisconsin.
The divisions left by the dispute were indeed deep and lasting. Former strikers were unanimous in sharing Keiler’s feelings toward the “superscabs,” and some families were still divided as a result.86 Some former De Pere strikers also related that they were now more wary of talking to strangers because they were afraid of encountering replacement workers.87 The dispute had other lasting consequences. Some interviewees blamed the Republican party for what had happened to them and claimed that they had stopped voting for the GOP as a result.88 Many also felt betrayed by their government, reasoning that they had been unjustly victimized for exercising their legitimate right to strike. Frustrated and angry, some argued that their best chance of success would have entailed physically stopping the replacements from taking their jobs. Jim Maddix recalled that he had promised his wife before the dispute had started that he would not become involved in any violence. Twelve years later, however, Maddix felt that he should have acted differently: “We all said the same thing, that it was too peaceful a strike, the fact after the matter. What I have said is that, wherever I’m working and they are to a point where they look like they are going to go on strike, I’m either going to quit that job or if I’m going to stay there, I’m divorcing my wife. I will not stay married to her because I will not make a commitment like that again because I will be violent. I will not stand there and watch these ass-holes go through the line and take my god-damn job. I won’t do it again, not if that’s where I’m working. I will get revenge. It won’t just be on the workers, it will be on the management. To me, I don’t care. I’ve been able to stay passive with all of these feelings for however long, these dozen years, but I won’t go through it again. I’ll go down but I guarantee you, somebody will go down with me.”89

86 Denny Aerts, a mild mannered ex-striker, admitted in 1999, for example, that: “When I see some of the former union brothers, the thirteen that went across, when you see them it just makes your blood curdle. They can’t look you in the eye and when I see them, I make sure they see me, just be in their face. I won’t say anything to them, but I just make sure they see me.” Denny Aerts, interview by the author, August 9, 1999, De Pere, Wisconsin.

87 Bob Prall, interview by the author, August 10, 1999, Green Bay, Wisconsin.

88 Bob Prall, interview by the author, August 10, 1999, Green Bay, Wisconsin.

89 Jim Maddix, interview by the author, August 9, 1999, De Pere, Wisconsin.
While many former strikers have found it difficult to put the dispute behind them, the walkout apparently did not inflict permanent economic damage on the company. IP managers have consistently refused to disclose how much money they lost during the dispute, instead emphasizing that the replacement workers were efficient. Since 1988, the mill has continued to operate; in 1999, one IP executive even called Nicolet a “success story” because it had been operated effectively with replacement employees. In general, IP has continued to grow since the dispute, consolidating its status as the world’s biggest paper company. Although IP endured the strikes for the vast majority of the year, its 1988 profits soared 85 percent to $754 million. Sales increased 22 percent, from $7.8 billion in 1987 to $9.5 billion in 1988. The record earnings enabled IP to acquire Europe’s largest paper company, Aussedat-Rey, in 1989. CEO John Georges reported with satisfaction that in 1988 the strong demand, “led to higher prices on most of our major product lines, and we compounded the benefits by continuing to emphasize cost reductions, customer service, and quality.”

Since the strike, the city of De Pere has grown, successfully attracting new housing developments and businesses. The community has became popular with Green Bay commuters and has become much more diversified as a result, casting off its mill town roots. Former replacement workers now live in De Pere in large numbers, and there are signs that they are more sympathetic to the union than they were at the time of the dispute. One current De Pere worker, for example, related that the experience of working in the paper industry for over a decade had made many replacements understand the strikers’ position better. In other locations, replacement workers have often gained more understanding of the union’s position once they have worked in the industry for some time.

In a decade of union decline, the IP strike certainly highlighted

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90 Jim Gilliland, interview by the author, August 6, 1998, Mobile, Alabama.
the difficulties that organized labor faced when strikes occurred. In all three struck locations, fewer than five percent of strikers crossed the picket lines and returned to work. The militancy and determination of the strikers was not enough to ensure victory, however. Within a broader context, the IP strike greatly weakened the UPIU. Following the dispute, other companies secured similar concessions from workers who were afraid of walking out and being replaced.93 In 1991, UPIU president Wayne Glenn went as far as to claim that permanent replacement had destroyed labor’s bargaining ability, ensuring that collective bargaining had been replaced by what he called “collective begging.”94 In an effort to prohibit the hiring of permanent replacements, the AFL-CIO embarked on a major legislative campaign that was supported by most Democratic politicians. Republican-led filibusters in the Senate in the summers of 1992 and 1994, however, thwarted these efforts to secure labor law reform.95

Following the strike, relations between the UPIU and IP remained strained. In March 1990, the union attempted to stem further concessionary bargaining at IP plants by encouraging its local unions to refuse contracts, thereby building up a massive strike threat against the company. Again, however, many locals refused to join the effort, afraid that their members would be replaced. Relations between the two sides did stabilize after December 1992, when they reached a formal “peace accord.” Under this agreement, IP agreed not to seek further concessions from UPIU locals while the international union agreed to call off its ongoing corporate campaign against the company.96

In De Pere, although the dispute was still recalled with some bitterness, few former strikers expressed regrets about their

93 Jim Gilliland, interview by the author, August 6, 1998, Mobile, Alabama.
actions. Most felt proud, indeed, that they had stood up for what they believed in. Bob Brey’s reflections at the end of his interview were typical: “Although we lost the strike and we probably had no chance of winning this god-darn thing, what to me is important is the fact that we all stood together, the vast majority of us just stood together, helped each other out, and now when I see these people, I can hold my head high and I’m proud of what we tried to do. Obviously we didn’t accomplish it but I don’t have any regrets and I can hold my head up and talk to these people rather than trying to go back to the mill and just worry about myself and to hell with them. So, that’s it.”

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97 Bob Brey, interview by the author, August 10, 1999, De Pere, Wisconsin.