

# Strikebreakers (AKA – Scabs), Why?

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# STRIKEBREAKERS (AKA – SCABS), WHY?

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Strikebreakers do not help.

They do not rescue.

They step into the space where solidarity was meant to stand.

In return, they receive a wage.

A temporary payment for a permanent wound to collective power.

When I try to understand their place in the moral architecture of society, I find myself circling an empty center. Their actions clearly benefit them in the narrowest sense, an immediate payment, a temporary reprieve from scarcity, but even that “benefit” feels hollow, like a coin earned by dimming the light of others.

The question “Why do people become strikebreakers?” is not really about economics. It is about how individuals situate themselves within systems of power, responsibility, and survival.

So, I ask the strikebreakers, why? Why cross that line?

You might say it is for the money, but that is the same answer anyone gives when they do not want to look deeper. That answer feels too simple, anyone doing anything for money could say the same.

In my own search, I find an absence of literature praising strikebreakers. I assume this is not accidental. It is revealing, nevertheless. Strikebreaking is a role that benefits systems, not societies.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to find papers celebrating strikebreakers because their function is to preserve the status quo of an employer during a moment of worker resistance. Strikebreakers are not hired to solve a social problem; they are hired to prevent workers from solving one.

That is why the literature is thin. There is no coherent moral argument that says, undermining collective bargaining, weakening worker leverage, prolonging unsafe or unjust conditions...is socially beneficial.

Or a heroic act.

It is beneficial only to the party resisting change.

The “benefit” of strikebreakers is framed as stability, but it is a false stability. Some will argue that strikebreakers keep essential services running. But this is a surface-level justification. It is the same logic as patching a leaking dam with human bodies.

It maintains order by preventing justice.

A society that relies on strikebreakers to maintain “stability,” is a society that refuses to confront the instability caused by exploitation and mistreatment in pursuit of capital gains.

These are survival arguments, not moral ones.

They are the same arguments people use when participating in systems they privately know are harmful, the tension between moral agency (my actions matter), and economic coercion (my choices are constrained). Strikebreakers often act under the latter.

If strikebreaking were socially beneficial, we would see academic defenses, moral frameworks, public narratives of heroism.

Instead, we see silence, discomfort, euphemisms. This is what happens when a role is economically functional but ethically indefensible.

“What does it say about a society that it must hire people to undermine those seeking fairness?”

Strikebreakers are not a natural phenomenon.

They are a symptom of a system that fears its own workers. If a strike is a collective act of refusal, a moment when workers reclaim their agency by withdrawing the labor that sustains a system, then a strikebreaker is not merely someone who crosses a line. They interrupt a conversation that workers are trying to have with power.

And what do they gain in return?

A short-term wage, yes. But it is a bargain that trades long-term dignity for immediate survival, or sometimes for convenience, or sometimes simply for instant indulgence. They

are paid not just in dollars, but in illusions, the illusion of necessity, the illusion of neutrality, the illusion that their choice harms no one, the illusion that they are simply “doing what they must.”

Yet most illusions have a cost.

What comes into view is the old struggle between an individual’s need to survive and a collective’s need to transform the very conditions of survival. A strikebreaker chooses the former at the expense of the latter, yet only the latter has the power to reshape society in ways that make survival less precarious for everyone.

If there is any benefit to the strikebreaker’s role, it is not borne by society. It accrues instead to the system that thrives on isolated individuals rather than organized communities. And that is why the figure of the strikebreaker remains so difficult to redeem, their choice reinforces the very machinery that keeps collective transformation out of reach.

The strikebreaker is not the villain of the story, but the symptom of a system that keeps people precarious enough to betray their own kind. They are not villains so much as instruments, maybe unwilling, maybe willing, of a logic that keeps people divided, exhausted, and unable to imagine a world in which they might rise together rather than scramble alone.

We all have reasons. We all have narratives.

Every choice we make arrives with justification, even if the justification is assembled after the fact. Humans rarely act from pure logic; we act from a blend of fear, anxiety, hope, habit, and the stories we tell ourselves to make those impulses feel coherent.

Some narratives are grounded in reality, a clear-eyed understanding of our circumstances, our values, our responsibilities. Others are softer, more comforting, stories designed not to reveal the truth, but to protect us from it.

And perhaps the most human thing is that we often cannot tell the difference. The strikebreaker’s narrative is just one example. To cross a picket line, one must believe something that makes the act bearable: “I need to feed my family.” “The strike won’t work anyway.” “Someone else would take the job if I don’t.” “I’m not responsible for the system; I’m just surviving in it.”

These stories are not always lies. But they are not always truths either. They are survival strategies, psychological shelters built in a storm.

For example, saying “someone else would do it” is the same logic used to excuse participation in harmful systems throughout history. It shifts responsibility outward, as if ethics were determined by the behavior of hypothetical strangers rather than our own choices. A refined counterpoint would be, “The fact that harm is possible without you does not absolve the harm done through you.”

“Someone else would take the job” is not a justification, it is a surrender.

Collective bargaining begins with private negotiations each of us conducts within ourselves. No system endures by destiny alone; it persists because enough individuals continue to uphold it, participate in it. Whichever the reasoning is.

Systems of exploitation survive because individuals assume their choices do not matter. But if no one accepted those conditions, employers would be forced to improve them. Ethical change begins when someone refuses to be the replaceable cog the system assumes them to be.

Narratives do not just justify actions; they anesthetize conscience. They help us sleep. They help us believe we are not causing any harm. They help us avoid the unbearable tension between what we do and who we imagine ourselves to be. The existence of these narratives does not make people weak.

It makes them human.

The real question is not why people create narratives, we all do. The question is, what conditions make certain narratives necessary? What systems force people to choose stories that harm the collective just to preserve the self?

When survival is precarious, moral consideration shrinks. When people feel powerless, they cling to whatever story gives them agency, even if it is an illusion.

To the strikebreakers. If you believe that the generous pay rate, the sudden respect, the hotel room, the airfare, the catered meals, the “special treatment” you receive from the employer is a sign of your worth, pause for a moment.

Ask yourself, would any of these be offered to you if you were a regular employee? Would they fly you across the country to do the same job their own workers do every day? Would they put you in a hotel? Would they pay you double or triple the normal wage? Would they

treat you like someone precious, someone essential, someone worth protecting? Or is all of this simply the price of your willingness to break the collective power of the people who actually built that workplace?

Because here is the truth beneath the surface, you are not being rewarded. You are being used. You are valuable only in the moment you undermine the people whose absence gives workers leverage.

You are paid well only because your presence weakens the demands of those who are fighting for better conditions, conditions you yourself would never accept from the employer under normal circumstances.

The corporation is not showing you respect. It is showing you strategy. It is not treating you fairly. It is treating you instrumentally. And when the strike ends, when the workers either win or lose, your special treatment evaporates.

The hotel room disappears. The inflated wage disappears. The flights stop. The attention stops. Because you were never meant to stay.

You were meant to break.

If you think I have been harsh or unfair to strikebreakers, you should read Ode to a Scab – by Jack London 1876-1916. Here is the first part of that poem, “After God had finished the rattlesnake, the toad, and the vampire, He had some awful substance left with which He made a scab. A scab is a two-legged animal with a corkscrew soul, a waterlogged brain, and a combination backbone made of jelly and glue. Where others have hearts, he carries a tumor of rotten principles.”

And I left the worst part, the remaining part, out on purpose.

Jack London’s Ode to a Scab is one of the most blistering pieces of labor-movement rhetoric ever written. London was not describing a person. He was describing a role.

He took the figure of the strikebreaker and exaggerated it into a grotesque caricature, not because he believed every strikebreaker was literally monstrous, but because he wanted to expose the function they served in a system built on exploitation.

In other words, the venom was not aimed at the individual human being. It was aimed at the mechanism that turns a desperate person into a tool of corporate power.

A strikebreaker receives extraordinary treatment only because their presence helps the employer avoid treating anyone fairly. The perks are not respect; they are leverage. The reward is not honor; it is a bribe to weaken collective power.

London used fury to make that point.

Harshness in moral language often arises when the stakes are collective, not individual. When one person's action harms only themselves, we speak gently. When one person's action harms the many, we reach for sharper tools.

My attempt is to use clarity instead.

The real target is not the person, it is the system that produces the conditions for betrayal. London's poem is a scream from a time when workers had almost no protections, no legal rights to strike, and no recourse except solidarity. His language reflects that desperation.

I am only interrogating the illusion of "special treatment." The transactional nature of corporate incentives. The narratives people use to justify harmful choices. The structural forces that make those choices possible.

Strikebreakers, why?

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