

STRIKES AND SUPPORT SYSTEMS:

WHAT HAPPENED IN SUDBURY

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Recently, professional helpers and social researchers have become interested in examining the natural helping processes in our society. Natural helping networks, support systems, and self-help groups have become the subject of study and research at a time when the effectiveness of professional helping is being questioned. In this paper, we describe the development of two support groups which arose as a result of the strike by 11,700 members of Local 6500 of the United Steelworkers of America against Inco Metals Company: Wives Supporting the Strike and the Citizens Strike Support Committee. Each of these support groups played a unique and vital role in offsetting the stressful effects of the long campaign among workers and their families.

The strike began on September 15, 1978 and ended on June 3, 1979. It was the longest strike in Canadian history in terms of workdays lost, and a very costly one for the families involved. The final agreement which was reached after eight and one half months was considered a victory for the union. The information for the case studies was obtained primarily through interviews with former support group members. The authors acknowledge with sincere appreciation their assistance and cooperation.

Wives Supporting the Strike

The day after the strike began, there was a board meeting of 'Women Helping Women', an established self-help and advocacy group for women in Sudbury. At this meeting, one woman expressed her fears and frustrations about the situation she and her family now confronted: "What happens to us now? I've never been on strike before!" The chairperson suggested that the wives of the strikers form an organization to help families cope with the strike, and to demonstrate support for their husbands.

Three women approached members of the union executive with this proposal. The union men immediately reminded them of what had happened during the unsuccessful 1958 strike between the Steelworkers' predecessor, Mine Mill Local 598, and Inco. At a mass rally of workers' wives held in

the Sudbury Arena, a back-to-work resolution was passed, and the men subsequently were pressured to accept a poor contract. Information obtained later suggested that the women had been manipulated by local political and church leaders, by Inco management, and by a handful of wives using scare tactics and red-baiting. Since that time, any involvement by women in union affairs has been met with suspicion, and it follows that the union's reaction to the women's proposal to form a support group was one of only cautious approval.

The women printed leaflets stating who they were, what they hoped to accomplish, and inviting others to join with them. To reach the wives, the leaflets were handed out to the men at the Steelworkers Hall. The men's reaction was not positive, the general opinion being that the union hall was no place for a woman. After this appeal, about thirteen women came to the first meeting. Leaflets went out again and the information was circulated among women by word of mouth. Attendance at the meetings rose to 40, however during the strike period over 200 women were involved at one time or another in the group's activities.

A seven member steering committee was formed at the first meeting and re-elections of this committee were held monthly. Confidence in the original seven members was apparently high, as only two position changes occurred in the latter part of the strike. The steering committee met each week and a general meeting was held every two weeks. The chairwoman of 'Women Helping Women', not a striker's wife herself, was on the steering committee and chaired all the meetings. The process was democratic. The women frequently broke into buzz groups to come up with ideas or discuss proposals and then re-assembled to give feedback. Everyone had a say, but only those who were wives of strikers could vote.

The three functions of Wives Supporting the Strike (WSS) were to provide practical aid, education and moral support. Members aligned themselves with one or another of these objectives, depending on their expertise or interest.

On the practical side, the women established clothing depots in various locations, and later a baby depot which supplied infant formula,

clothing, and furniture. In the spring, they provided hundreds of pairs of children's shoes. Some of the women gathered inexpensive recipes and distributed a cookbook to help the wives cope with the drastically reduced income (strike pay for a family of four was \$34.00 per week). A telephone lifeline service was organized by the WSS crisis committee. Immediate help or advice was thereby available to any wife facing personal or family troubles, or who simply needed a friendly ear.

The purpose of the education program was to inform women about the strike issues, and to develop an understanding of this strike in terms of a broader social and political context. Films dealing with other strikes were shown and speakers on relevant subjects addressed the group. One of their more imaginative projects was a play which depicted the Inco Board of Directors on trial. For the children, a comic book entitled "What is a Strike?" was written with the moral of the story emphasizing that if people stick together against a bully, they can win. Spokespersons for WSS were invited to speak at women's conferences and at benefits organized elsewhere for the strike, all of which resulted in donations. The women also viewed public speaking as a means to inform Canadians about the strike and about Inco as a multinational corporation.

There were numerous morale-boosting activities. Family Picket Days and weiner roasts were held at the plant gates. Dave Patterson, President of Local 6500, later said, "The wives went right out to Inco, right in front of them and had a barbecue. They told the company straight out - you aren't going to get us in the Arena this time".¹ Other activities included a teen dance, a float in the Santa Claus Parade, a Pots and Pans "Stand by Your Man" March, and a chorus which warmed up many an event with rousing songs of solidarity.

The most memorable event was the Christmas Party for 10,000 children. The Citizens Strike Support Committee began fund-raising for Christmas and in conjunction the women conducted a used toy drive and asked for toy donations from area stores. The success of the party was assured when a convoy of trucks laden with toys and other Christmas treats arrived from Southern Ontario communities. The entire Steelworkers Hall was filled and the women worked day and night sorting and wrapping the gifts. In carrying out this

event successfully, the women had proved their ability to support the union, and achieved credibility. In the words of one union man: "The Christmas Party made believers out of the most anti-support group people".

Another massive organizing effort culminated in a bean supper served to about 5,000 people in fourteen area halls and church basements. In tackling such projects, women who had previously limited themselves to the organization of a household, learned that these skills could be applied on a community scale. As one member commented, "It's really so simple, it's nothing complicated...just go out and find out how to do it".

Throughout the strike, the union exerted a controlling influence on WSS, and conflicts did arise. The most notable of these occurred when the women issued an unauthorized press release urging rejection of the May 1979 contract offer, the first brought to the membership since September. Although they felt that the contract was not worth eight months of strike, they did state, "We will, however, support the members if they decide to accept the contract and return to work". With this press release, they had changed from a purely supportive role, and their action was seen as interference in union business. The contract was rejected by the membership a day later.

Conflicts also arose within the group itself. There was a split between the women who were service-oriented and those who were more politically-oriented. Due to skillful leadership and the democratic process of the group, feelings were expressed and tensions dealt with openly. Although opinions differed as to which emphasis was most important, they realized that each area of the group's work had validity, and moreover that their ability to achieve the overall group objectives could be undermined by dissension.

What did the wives gain from the experience of WSS? Some felt it was a growth-producing experience and reported strengthened marital relationships. One woman said, "It was the most exciting thing I've done in my life next to giving birth!" For others, working in WSS was a difficult personal experience due either to interpersonal problems within the group or frequently due to a lack of support from their husbands. Besides the men not wanting to accept responsibilities of child and home care, one woman suggested that they were afraid of their wives getting together with other people, and

perhaps finding out that there was something missing in their lives.

Wives Supporting the Strike disbanded when the strike settlement was reached on June 3, 1979. Commenting on the role played by Wives Supporting the Strike, a spokesperson for the group stated, "I feel we were an important part in the success of the strike. Our activities helped a lot of people cope with what they may not have been able to otherwise." Besides providing this backbone of practical and moral support on the home front, they generated publicity and a national interest in the strike. The union president said, "They were the real heroines of the whole strike...they deserve more credit than they'll ever get."²

The Citizens Strike Support Committee

In voting to strike, Local 6500 faced seemingly overwhelming odds. Inco's nickel stockpile could last an estimated eight to nine months, and Steel International had advised against strike action. Although it appeared to be economically suicidal for the workers to strike, feelings against the company were strong.

The day after the strike was called, a group of friends met privately to discuss what could be done to aid the strikers. They felt that without organized support, the strike could not be sustained and the battle with Inco would be lost. These people were independent leftists, and they realized that a group consisting only of themselves would not be effective. As one member said, "We'd get red-baited out of existence". To achieve the needed credibility, they joined forces with the local NDP and the next day a meeting was held with Sudbury NDP members of provincial parliament, riding association executives and union representatives. A sub-committee appointed from this gathering developed recommendations for the formation of a Strike Support Committee. A Sudbury lawyer who had acted on behalf of the union was suggested as the chairman, and the idea of a Strike Support Newsletter was raised. The entire group, which now included the lawyer, met again and the Citizens Strike Support Committee (CSSC) was officially formed. It consisted of about twelve people who had varying backgrounds in community organization, law, journalism, education, and politics. They shared in common an ideological commitment to the workers, and a contempt for large

multinational corporations which exploit human and natural resources. A press release announcing the formation of the Citizens Strike Support Committee was issued Monday, September 25, just ten days after the strike began.

The CSSC wanted to avoid a repetition of 1958 when there was mobilization against the strike from all sectors of the community. By organizing quickly, the committee made it clear that this time there was a base of support in the community. One member said, "The Citizens Committee likely immobilized and rendered impotent from the beginning, anti-strike or back to work movements". The objectives of the committee were to rally local and national support for the strike, to raise money, and to keep the morale of the strikers high. "Cheerleading" was how one person described its role.

The committee was a loosely structured organization. Weekly meetings were held, however the chairman said, "We did more work than have meetings". The group operated with the sanction of Local 6500 and at least two members were union men. All activities and publications were approved by the union beforehand.

On October 3, the committee published its first issue of the Strike Support News. The biweekly paper included items on strike issues, Inco's local and international operations, and community activities of interest to strikers and their families. Wives Supporting the Strike and the Citizens Strike Support Committee publicized their forthcoming events, and local businessmen and other unions relayed encouragement to the strikers through the paper.

The CSSC organized two social events for the strikers. The first was a corn roast held in October, when 12,000 cobs of corn were trucked in from an Ottawa Valley farm. The second event was the 'Strikers' Ball' which took place in the Steelworkers Hall after Christmas. Members of the committee helped in the organization of the Christmas Party and the women's Bean Supper. Although there was no formal relationship between the two groups, a link was maintained by the WSS chairperson who also worked on the Strike Support News.

In order to raise money for the Children's Christmas Fund, a car raffle was held, and individuals, businesses, and churches were solicited for donations. Approximately, \$40,000 was raised for this fund. The committee contributed to Local 6500's general strike fund through the sale of support buttons and lapel pins. Members also used their national network of personal contacts to initiate strike benefits in several major cities.

Efforts by individual members of the committee were important. One member contacted certain mortgage and finance companies and strongly encouraged them not to press strikers for payments. He also took appropriate dampening acting with local media when forecasts of a dismal Christmas were made. Two members who were freelance journalists worked to keep the strike in the national media and to get stories about the strike as widely distributed as possible. Another committee member approached his contacts in the religious and university communities for support.

After Christmas, the pace of committee activity slowed down. Energies were drained from the group when several members became involved in campaigning for the spring federal election. However, the Strike Support News was still published through the efforts of a few untiring individuals, and the committee maintained a strong public presence. When the strike was won, the committee disbanded with a feeling of satisfaction for the job they had done.

The Citizens Strike Support Committee had three significant strengths. First, the Committee was able to organize and go into action almost immediately after the strike was called, so that the support was available when it was most needed. The second important factor was that this particular group of individuals possessed a unique array of resources, knowledge and talent which they utilized on behalf of the strikers. The third important element was their total commitment and dedication to the strikers' cause. Through the Committee's efforts, public support was rallied locally and nationally, and any back-to-work movement was preempted.

Conclusion

Several lessons can be drawn from these case studies but perhaps most important is the demonstration of effective mobilization of support. Within 24 hours of the strike announcements, both groups had begun organizing. WSS found its impetus and leadership in the existing Women Helping Women organization, and a campaign was developed to reach the wives of strikers. The CSSC had its basis in a network of friends who shared common values and who then sought out alliances which would add credibility and specific talents to a support group. In both groups, the objectives were defined and the means to achieve those objectives quickly set into motion. The mobilization of support in the "after-shock" phase following the strike vote was of critical importance. For the women, WSS was the mechanism by which anxiety and a feeling of helplessness could be replaced by constructive action and a sense of control. For all those on strike, the CSSC provided immediate feedback of the acceptance and support for the strikers within the larger community.

The strike could have been a traumatic and discouraging experience had it not been for these two support groups. As support systems, both groups served to enhance the adaptive competence of the families in dealing with this period of prolonged stress. They were able to address specific physical, social, and emotional needs which emerged as a result of the strike. The wives provided such basic essentials as clothing and shoes, items which many families could not afford. Social events and morale-boosting activities were opportunities to share some fun together, and fostered a collective sense of identity and feeling of belongingness with other families on strike. The information disseminated through the women's education program and the *Strike Support News* helped people to better understand the purpose of their struggle and to see it in a broader perspective.

The belief which was central to the functions of both groups was that these miners were important people with an important cause. Through publicity and the mobilization of local and national support, the strike became a cause celebre and the strikers its heroes. A tremendous pride developed among the workers which in no small way contributed to their ability to cope until a satisfactory settlement was reached.

Wives Supporting the Strike and the Citizens Strike Support Committee were flexible and accessible support systems which responded to the needs and circumstances of their target population. They played a role which no formal service agency was designed to play, or could play, with the degree of understanding and commitment necessary.

FOOTNOTES

1. Interview with Dr. Henry Radecki, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Laurentian University, September 27, 1979.
2. Ibid.