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MAY 30, 1980.

Sometimes the myths of history blind a group of people or a nation to such an extent that they do things harmful to their interest. The French built the Maginot Line to defend themselves against a war like the first world war. The Germans would attack across the Rhine; they would never invade through Holland and Belgium. But, as we all know, they did.

Throughout the Canadian labour movement, the myth is that the workers' wives broke the 1958 Inco strike of the International Mine Mill and Smelter Workers. At a rally in the Sudbury Arena on December 12, the wives apparently passed resolutions urging the union to accept a wage freeze in the first year and to put Inco's November offer to a government-sponsored secret ballot.

The myth is that the wives created so much trouble at home that 11 days later the strikers accepted a new Inco contract offer which turned out to be a bad contract.

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Whether the myth was true or not did not seem to matter, what was important ~~it~~ was that those involved in the Inco strike 20 years later believed it was true. This time, though, the myth helped, not hurt, those who believed it.

Local 6500 of the United Steelworkers of America, who now represents the 11,500 workers at Inco in the Sudbury basin, voted on September 15, 1978 to go on strike. The workers knew they faced an uphill battle.

Because Inco had a stockpile of ^Knickel which could last a year, it was arrogant at the bargaining table. Its final offer before the strike amounted to a net increase of only four cents. It included "takeaways", demands which would erase gains the workers had made in previous contracts. One would not allow the local union office to get involved in a grievance until the final stage before arbitration.

Even higher union officials advised against a strike. Stewart Cooke, leader of Ontario's Steelworkers publicly spoke against a strike before the strike vote. Former NDP leader Stephen Lewis called the strike ^K"sheer ^Emadness".

The workers knew, however, that they had to take a stand. If it was not now, they would have to two or three years later.

A Sudbury women's liberation organization, Women Helping Women, supported the demands of the strikers. It decided to set up a committee to organize the workers' wives to support the strike. The committee was determined that the myth of 1958 would not be repeated.

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One of the committee's members, Arja Lane, said before the strike, she was not concerned with her husband's work or his union. To her Inco was just the place her husband had gone to work for each day for five years. Her main interest was her nine-month-old daughter.

She said she naively expected Inco would give a decent offer and the union would not strike. "When the strike was announced that Saturday, I freaked. I didn't know where the money was going to come from."

Joan Kuyek, a member of Women Helping Women, said, "We thought at the time the myth of 1958 was true, but we could see why the women would feel that way.

"The women bear the brunt of any strike. The family's income has dropped, but they are expected to keep up the job of running the house. They can't use the car for errands because there is no money for gas. If any appliance breaks down, they must still do its job. Women end up washing the floor on their hands and knees,

" Our purpose was to make the strike bearable so that the wives could support it. We saw it as an important strike for Sudbury and the Canadian labour movement."

The committee wrote a leaflet for the workers' wives called "You work for Inco too". It said the women's work in the home made it possible for their husbands and their sons to do the labour from which Inco made its profits. The issues of the strike- a just wage increase, a cost of living allowance, fair job classifications, and voluntary retirement after 30 years of service- were as important to them as they were to their husbands.

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The committee received permission from the union executive to pass the leaflet to the strikers as they registered for their first strike vouchers. This helped to legitimize the women because they were inside the Steelworkers Hall, not outside among the many leftist groups selling their newspapers.

Linda Obensawin, another committee member, said the wives were afraid to hand out the leaflets because they had not been union activists. Still they were not prepared for the rude reception the leaflet received.

The elder strikers and some of the union executive kept bringing up the myth. One said, "What are you trying to do, start another 1958?"

When Arja Lane told another striker to give the leaflet to his wife, he said, "My wife doesn't read."

The local union executive did not give the committee much support. The local president, Dave Patterson, who supported the women, traveled across Ontario shortly after the strike began. This left the day-to-day operation of the strike in the hands of the old guard, the right wing of the union.

They did not trust the wives and did not think they were capable of achieving their ends. They refused to give the committee the union mailing list.

Despite the obstacles and the rude reception to the leaflet, the committee got off the ground. In response to the leaflet, 21 women met at the Steelworkers Hall to found the group, "wives Supporting the Strike". All women who supported the goals of the group could join its activities, but only the strikers' wives could vote on any decisions. Their first task was to get more women, which they did. The second meeting

Arja's wives

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The group wasted no time in getting down to work. They elected a new steering committee, which would be re-elected each month. Joan Kuyek was chosen as chairperson, although she was not a striker's wife, because of her experience in organizing unions, tenants and women's organizations. Linda Obensawin was elected English spokesperson and Marguerite Mallette French spokesperson. The other members were Sherri
X — Farron, internal communications co-ordinator; Susan McGraw, treasurer; Arja Lane, union liason; and Grace Hubert, secretary.

At this meeting the group also set up an education committee to explain the issues of the strike to the wives. It set up a crisis committee to handle a wife's family or personal crisis; a clothing committee to set up clothing depots; a union scrounge committee to raise donations; and a Santa Claus parade committee to build a float.

The group also set up a Christmas party committee. Christmas was symbolic in Sudbury because, according to the myth of 1958, those wives who broke the strike said it was destroying the family. Their children were hurting the most because they would have no toys for Christmas. The group was determined this would not happen in 1978.

"From the start we saw the biggest problems for the wives in a long strike would be boredom, and a growing isolation," said Joan Kuyek. "We decided any public action we would take had to be pleasant in order to get the wives out. We wanted them to feel they were part of a larger community with a common cause, to win the strike."

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An early incident taught the group to set its own priorities. The members cancelled a meeting when the union ^{is} called to say a local farmer was donating his potatoes to the union. The members went to the farm instead.

"We found out the potatoes were not for the union, but for ourselves, and we had to pay for them," said Linda Obonsawin. "We decided then and there that nothing would come before our meetings. Our own priorities came first, no one else's."

The group's first public action was a family picket at the Copper Cliff main gates in October. It was quite successful; over 150 enjoyed an weiner roast. Rita McNeil, a feminist singer, rallied the crowd with union songs.

Encouraged by this success, the Wives Supporting the Strike tried other avenues. A new committee wrote a comic book to explain the strike to the children. It showed small children that by sticking together, they could tame the schoolyard bully, just as the strikers by sticking together could tame Inco.

The group also held a collection from the secretarial staff at Inco.

Not all projects produced success. The group built a float they were sure would be the best in the Santa Claus parade. But, alas, it never made it to the parade; while it was idling in the Armouries, the diesel ran out of fuel and blew a fuse. Linda Obonsawin said, "The whole episode almost became a catastrophe. Nobody knew what had happened, so we started to fight over who was at fault."

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The episode did not help the group's credibility with the old guard of the union. The union's hall manager stuck the women into an unheated back room in December the night they showed the classic American labour film, "Marlan County, U.S.A."

By late November, the Christmas party became the primary objective of the group. The labour movement made it the focus of the national appeal for support. Members of the local and the wives' group travelled to Ottawa, Hamilton, Oshawa, Toronto, Windsor, Peterborough and Thunder Bay for rallies and plant collections. No Sudbury child would go without a toy. 1958 was in the back of everybody's mind.

The Christmas committee chairperson, Linda Techevsky, *Tchorzewski* exhausted herself by trying to do too much by herself. The rest of the group came to her aid. Joan Kuyek said, "We knew the Christmas party had to succeed because it could have meant the strike."

"We originally planned to repair used toys to present to the children," said Sherri Parron. "The scrounge committee found the old toys; we patched holes on dolls, repaired broken dump trucks, you name it."

"With only two weeks to go we were really worried because we had only 750 toys for 10,000 children," said Linda Obonsawin. "Then we heard of a convoy of trucks from Southern Ontario which was speeding for Sudbury, not stopping for red lights."

The convoy were bringing the toys collected as part of the labour movement's appeal. The first to arrive came from the Oil, Chemical and Atomic workers in Sarnia. The trucks kept pouring in. The group also got money to buy toys in Sudbury.

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Denise Savard, a member of the group and the mother of a two-year old daughter, said, "We had to sort thousands of toys according to age, up to 12 years old. We moved into the Steelworker Hall on Friday night and worked straight through for three days.

"Everyone pitched in. I even got my husband to sort the toys. When it came time for a break, I couldn't pull him away; he was enjoying himself so much.

"The restaurants were very good. All we had to say was the food was for the workers of the Christmas party and we got free pizzas and hamburgers."

"The Christmas party of December 16 and 17 was a huge success," reported Joan Kayek. "In Sudbury we gave a sandwich, a cookie, a soft drink, the comic book and a toy for each of 7,000 children. We had Santas from all over Ontario. In Valley East there was a party for 1,000 children, and Espanola. Hagar and Levack had another 2,000 children."

"What we had left over we sent to the Boise Cascade strikers in Port Frances," said Linda Obonsawin.

The Christmas party turned the corner for the Wives Supporting the Strike. Strikers congratulated them when they gave out a leaflet at the voucher meeting before Christmas. The old guard of the union had to recognize their right to participate in the strike.

Arja Lane said the party gave the wives confidence in themselves. "Here we were, just housewives, who were supposed to be unable to organize anything, pulling off a party for over 10,000 children. We realized we could work collectively, even though we came from many different backgrounds."

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The success of the party did not make them forget the myth of 1958, as can be seen in the leaflet they gave the strikers before Christmas:

Because our strength is in unity, the company will try to divide us. The company will try to put wives against the husbands and the union as they have in the past. You might even get a letter from the company trying to paint a false picture of the situation. Please don't get taken in by false propoganda.

Striking is a tough way to fight a battle. We often feel isolated and confused. If you want to be properly informed by women who stand to lose as much as you do, attend one of our meetings.

After Christmas, Inco gave press statements that the only thing stalling the negotiations was the union's refusal to accept a change in the grievance procedure. At the time its money offer, after sorting out the various gimmicks used to camouflage its true value, still amounted to a net increase of four cents. The Wives Supporting the Strike and the rank and file of the union responded by closing the Copper Cliff gates to all salaried personnel.

The success of the Christmas party brought many new members ~~into~~ the group. Eventually 250 volunteered to help in one way or another.

The group held another family picket on what turned out to be the coldest day of the year. A choir of the wives gave its first public appearance that day. On Valentine's day it held a bean supper for 4,600 people. The beans were donated by the National Farmers Union.

"By February you could see the strikers were digging in," said Joan Kuyek. "It was harder to get people out to actions in the cold weather. It was a quiet determination; there was no sign of giving up."

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Arja Lane said, "When we got into these difficulties we had to remember who was the real enemy."

While the group held together, the two factions took on different functions within the organization. The more conservative faction who distrusted the steering committee promoted the social functions- the clothing depots, the crisis committee, and the baby committee, begun in March. They also organized a successful "Teen Disco" because the teenagers had been left out of the Christmas celebrations.

The more militant activists who trusted the steering committee promoted the activities of the education committee. They brought in speaker who explained how the United States, under John Foster Dulles, Eisenhower's Secretary of State and an Inco director, overthrew the popularly-elected government of Guatemala in 1954. Now Inco controls Guatemala's nickel deposits.

They showed a film called "With Babies and Banners", about the Women's Emergency Brigade in the Flint, Michigan sit-down strike against General Motors in 1937.

A highlight for Arja Lane was the mock trial of the Inco Board of Directors. She said it was an opportunity to express the wives' gut reactions to the strike.

"The whole strike had been a learning experience for us, because we discovered Inco did not care about its workers, our husbands, who would probably work for it for the rest of their lives.

"At first we were afraid, but our fear became anger. We felt the Inco Board were criminals for making us suffer through the strike. Just to say it in public helped us to vent our frustrations and go on."

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One task both groups supported but over which tensions grew was a proposed film documentary on the Wives Supporting the Strike by ^{Sophie Bissonnette?} ~~Joyce Rock~~ and ^{uck} Martin Daskworth of Montreal. Some saw it as part of the radical plot. Both sides supported the film as an organizing tool for other strikers' wives in similar strikes. They have demanded the right to approve the film before its release. *[It has been*

The group continued its work throughout the strike and the right wing of the union had to support its activities because the group was supporting the strike. The truce lasted until May.

After many months of fruitless bargaining, the dwindling nickel stockpile and the increased ~~in~~ world demand for copper and cobalt, other metals mined in Sudbury, finally forced Inco to make a serious offer for a settlement.

Inco offered a \$3.52 package in wages and benefits over three years. It also agreed to the ^{Co-operative} Classified Wage ^{Study} System which would give a uniform job evaluation for the different jobs based on 12 factors of training, skill and working conditions. The offer had its drawbacks; it delayed the folding in of the previous cost of living allowance from the last contract and the start of a new one. There was no voluntary retirement after 30 years of service with full pension. Despite these drawbacks, the local's negotiating committee recommended acceptance.

The Wives Supporting the Strike issued a public statement that, while they supported the union's negotiating committee, they recommended the offer be rejected.*

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"After much soul-searching, we decided unanimously... the offer was not worth the eight months of suffering we all had gone through, the strikers and the wives," said Linda Obonsawin. "When we went on strike, we went on Inco's terms. Had the offer come in December, it might have been acceptable, but not in May. When we went back to work, it would be on our terms, not Inco's."

The union executive was furious for the group saying anything. Even David Patterson, who had supported the group from its beginning, questioned its right to take a public stand on the offer. The group, however, stuck to its guns because the strike affected them as well as their husbands.

The group was not alone. The union's steward body recommended rejection of the offer, and the members did just that, by 58 per cent to 42 per cent.

Two weeks later, Inco improved its offer to a \$4.07 package over three years with voluntary retirement with full pension after 30 years of service. This offer the members accepted to end the eight-month strike.

Once the strike was over, the Wives Supporting the strike decided to disband. "Our only other choice was to become a ladies' auxiliary," said Sherri Parron. "We didn't want that; we believed we had our own demands and issues which were just as important as the union's."

"I miss the group now, the feeling of doing things together. It taught us to overcome the fear of speaking out on matters that affect us. The strike brought my family together. My husband appreciates what i do around the house more; before the strike he thought all I did was watch soap

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Arja Lane said, "All of us are different people because of what we did during the strike. Next to giving birth, it is the most exciting thing I've done in my life. It proves women's anger and energy can be channelled productively."

Marlene Routledge, a member, said, "I've met a lot of new people in the strike. By being in the group, I've had a chance to ^{help} ~~meet~~ people."

"Sometimes you get lost in the routine of a strike, but things like the wiener roast, the bean supper and the Wives' Chorus helped to bring people together," said Delores Higgins.

Some of the wives joined Women Helping Women; Sherri Farron and Linda Obonsawin participate in its nutrition committee.

Linda is not depressed by the end of the Wives Supporting the Striks. "I am confident we can rally together, if there is another strike or cutback."

Perhaps the myth of 1958 has been finally dispelled. Local 598 of the Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, the union at Inco at the time, had a wives' committee of 800 members who planned to march on Sudbury's City Hall to urge the mayor to get Inco back to the bargaining table.

Joe Pabfro, the mayor, arranged with Liola Breen, a woman opposing the strike who had walked out of the wives' committee meeting planning the march, to have the rally in the Sudbury arena under the pretext it would be too cold for a march.

When the wives arrived at the arena for the rally, they found the arena floor was already filled. They had to sit in the stands.

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The mayor, who chaired the meeting, accepted resolutions from Mrs. Breen which urged Mine Mill to accept a wage freeze in the first year and put Inco's November offer to a government-sponsored secret ballot. The mayor did not allow debate but told all those who opposed the resolutions to come down on the arena floor. Not all could hear and many were confused. When only 100 came down, the mayor declared the rest supported the resolutions.

Mine Mill held seven meetings that weekend throughout the Sudbury basin to counter the arena rally, but that did not stop Liola Breen. She told the "Toronto Star" she would organize the Canadian Association of Strikers' Wives to get rid of Communism and seek a union recognized by the Canadian Labour Congress. (Its predecessor, the C.C.L. had expelled Mine Mill in 1950 and granted its jurisdiction to the United Steelworkers.)

The wives of 1958 did not oppose the strike; they were outmanoeuvred.

But the myth had its importance, if only by negative example. The 1978 Wives Supporting the Strike turned the myth around. A study of the Sudbury strike by Laurentian University said families came closer together during the strike; two-thirds of the 649 strikers' wives interviewed said the Wives Supporting the Strike was effective in keeping up the morale of the strikers.

Dave Patterson said, "They were great, the unsung heroes. They saved our bacon a number of times. Otherwise we could have had a back-to-work movement. They opposed the May offer, but so did our members. I have a lot of respect for them because they took a lot of tough stands."