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Memory, Mobilization, and the Social Bases of Intra-Union Division: Some Lessons from the 2009-2010 USW Local 6500 Strike in Sudbury, Ontario

Adam D.K. King ¹

Abstract Purpose. This paper engages with workers' accounts of a strike in Northern Ontario, Canada to consider the processes through which intra-union tensions develop and to examine their implications for member involvement and mobilization.

Design/methodology/approach. The paper draws on interviews with currently employed and retired United Steelworkers miners in Sudbury, Ontario, and analyses their memories and narratives of the 2009-2010 strike at Vale (Inco).

Findings. I argue that differences in the accounts of the strike between older and younger workers result from their historically specific class positions, as well as the uneven nature of contract concessions. I suggest that generational tension could be an impediment to future broad-based member engagement.

Research limitations/implications. The research contributes to work on union renewal and social unionism.

Originality/value. The paper provides insight into the dynamics of member mobilisation and contract concessions, and asks us to consider the social bases of intra-union division.

Keywords: *Mining, Union renewal, Member mobilisation, Memory, Generational tension*

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1. Introduction

“Nobody voted for that contract.” So read the headline in the *Sudbury Star* upon the conclusion of the ratification vote that ended the strike at Vale-owned mines and processing facilities in Sudbury, Ontario by United Steelworkers (USW) Local 6500 in July 2010.² This longest strike in the history of mining in the region followed the controversial purchase of Inco, historic mining giant and fixture of Sudbury, by Brazilian-owned conglomerate CVRD (Vale in Sudbury) in 2006.³ With the 2008 financial crisis as a pretext, the new employer pursued an openly hostile attempt to overhaul labour relations and extract concessions from the workforce at its newly acquired operations. The strike began in July 2009, lasted nearly a year, and according to the union activist quoted above, concluded when workers begrudgingly voted in favour of a return to work and a new collective agreement containing considerable losses and givebacks.⁴

In many respects, nickel mining in Sudbury is exemplary of the economic trends and challenges facing the industrial unions formed over the period of the Great Depression and the “postwar compromise.”⁵ Globalization and capital concentration, growing precariousness and shrinking employment, and attacks on labour and the environment, all confront a union whose strength and strategic capacities were forged in an earlier era. In this the Steelworkers are not alone. Activists and scholars have been addressing these issues in a substantial literature on union renewal and revitalization.⁶ However, this research too often neglects workers’ subjectivities and the processes through which they are formed and re-formed, addressing questions of strategy, organization, and mobilization without enough appreciation for the extant places from which workers

2. C. Mulligan, *Nobody Voted for that Contract*, in *Sudbury Star*, July 10, 2010.

3. T. Perkins, *Inco Approves CVRD Takeover Bid*, in *Toronto Star*, September 25, 2006.

4. Vale/United Steelworkers of America Local 6500, *Collective Bargaining Agreement: Ontario Division*, July 8, 2010 - May 31, 2015; See also J. Peters, *Down in the Vale: Corporate Globalization, Unions on the Defensive, and the USW Local 6500 Strike in Sudbury, 2009-2010*, in *Labour/Le Travail* vol. 66, Fall, 2010, 73-105.

5. W. Roberts, J. Bullen, *A Heritage of Hope and Struggle: Workers, Unions, and Politics in Canada, 1930-1982*, in M.S. Cross and G.S. Kealey (eds.) *Modern Canada, 1930s-1980s*, McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, 1984, 105-140.

6. P. Fairbrother, C.A.B. Yates (eds.) *Trade Unions in Renewal: A Comparative Study*, Routledge, London, New York, 2013; C.M. Frege, J. Kelly (eds.) *Varieties of Unionism: Strategies for Union Revitalization in a Global Economy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004; R. Milkman, K. Voss (eds.) *Rebuilding Labor: Organizing and Organizers in the New Union Movement*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2004.

begin. Through an analysis of workers' recent experiences of a particularly trenchant labour conflict, this article seeks to draw attention to some potential constraints to union renewal and member mobilization. In particular, I show how workers' "collective memories"⁷ are shaped by historically specific class identities and the material circumstances of work, and argue that future organizing and mobilization strategies will need to address how workers use social and historical references to understand their current circumstances, and the divisions this can generate. For example, the uneven ways in which difficult changes such as shrinking employment opportunities, increased use of non-union contractors, and the union's defeat impact younger and older workers play a determining role in how interviewees understand the strike. Workers place the strike and current labour relations with Vale within historical narratives that reach backward and project forward. How they integrate current circumstances into their narratives of working class history in Sudbury shapes how they remember, and importantly, the degree to which they see collective action as a remedy for individual grievances. Workers of different ages offer contrasting narratives of the strike and prescriptions about how to improve the future of work in the mines. I contend that the latter creates the bases for generational tension and poses challenges to collective identity formation and the broad-based member engagement necessary to mount impactful resistance against the company.

The twenty interviews on which this paper is based covered work histories, workplace experiences and the impacts of foreign ownership, perceptions of the companies and unions, and the strike. Informants ranged in age from 29-74, with an average age of 48.6. However, workers in the sample clustered around what I refer to throughout the article as older and younger age groupings. At one end of the sample, workers ranged in age from 29-37 (9 participants), and at the other end from 50-74 (11 participants). No interviewees were between 38-49. My sampling method likely accounts for these age clusters. Participants were recruited through a snowball sampling method that initially began with two key informants (age 32 and 74). Those sampled through contacts beginning with each of the latter two people tended to also belong to the same age grouping.⁸ Five of the interviewees were retired, but still kept involved

7. M. Halbwachs, *Collective Memory*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992.

8. In Dunk's classic study of male working class culture in Thunder Bay, Ontario, he characterizes the friendship networks of working class men as "informal," and notes the loose parameters of inclusion. This seems to be true in this case as well. T.W. Dunk, *It's a*

with the union in some capacity. Of the workers in the younger age group, three had previously worked for contract, non-union firms, and two had obtained their jobs through an employment service, working through a probationary period before gaining full-time, unionized employment.

The striking differences in the responses of workers of different ages provide an interesting window through which to consider changes at the mines in Sudbury and the challenges facing labour. Moreover, the social and economic processes transforming work and community in Sudbury are quite similar to those facing deindustrializing regions generally and therefore offer lessons to unions and researchers confronting similar issues.⁹ The findings from these interviews highlight the ways in which these changes are expressed as intergenerational tensions within this particular union local and represent impediments to future mobilization against the company. While I agree with those calling for high participation unions¹⁰ and “social movement unionism,”¹¹ this paper suggests that barriers to such rank-and-file mobilization may arise from how particular union histories and cultures shape and constrain member activity and neglect the unique circumstances facing new workers.

In the first section of the article, I outline a brief background history of mining and unionization in Sudbury. The latter provides the backdrop against which older workers in the sample remembered and narrated the most recent strike. Next, I give an overview of Vale’s purchase of Inco and the 2009-2010 strike.¹² In the subsequent sections, I trace three findings that emerged from my interviews. First, I explore the contrasting memories and presentations of the strike among younger and older workers. I argue that the differences expressed by workers of various ages

Working Man’s Town: Male Working-Class Culture, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, Kingston, 2003, 7.

9. T. Dublin, *When the Mines Closed: Stories of Struggles in Hard Times*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1998; T.W. Dunk, *Remaking the Working Class: Experience, Class Consciousness, and the Industrial Adjustment Process*, *American Ethnologist*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2000, 878-900; D. Koistinen, *Confronting Decline: The Political Economy of Deindustrialization in New England*, University of Florida Press, Gainesville, 2013.

10. J.F. McAlevey, *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2016.

11. D. Camfield, *Canadian Labour in Crisis: Reinventing the Workers’ Movement*, Fernwood, Halifax, 2011; C. Lévesque, G. Murray, S. Le Queux, *Union Disaffection and Social Identity, Work and Organizations*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2005, 400-422; K. Moody, *Workers in a Lean World: Unions in the International Economy*, Verso, London, 1997; S. Ross, *Social Unionism and Membership Participation: What Role for Union Democracy?*, *Studies in Political Economy*, vol. 81, Spring, 2008, 129-157.

12. See Peters, *op. cit.*

are explained partly by their work histories and employment experiences. Considerable job loss in the mining industry, the increased use of contract workers, and the particularly aggressive business practices of Vale are the primary references for a picture of work life for younger workers. Older workers, on the other hand, place these developments in contrast to the victories wrenched from their previous employer, Inco, and thus maintain a stronger commitment to collective struggle. Second, I show how workers place the strike in a historical narrative, and contend that this sequencing influences the meaning workers impart to the strike. How they read the strike into their sense of history shapes what they believe can be done to improve their personal and collective circumstances. Last, I focus on workers' evaluations of the strike and its aftermath. I argue that the unwillingness to engage with the union, and the skepticism concerning the potential of solidarity and struggle on the part of younger workers, arise from the ways in which burdens and hardships impact them uniquely, and from a more general lowering of their expectations.

2. Mining and Miners in Sudbury

The Sudbury Basin is one of the richest mineral deposits on the planet, containing some of the world's largest supplies of nickel and copper. Like many resource-rich areas, Sudbury's fate has historically been bound up in often volatile and dependent political and economic relations.¹³ The International Nickel Company of Canada (later Inco) mines were originally developed by American capital, and for many decades tariffs and other measures prevented the growth of higher value-added processing and refining facilities in Canada.¹⁴ While some processing and refining takes place in Sudbury (and at Port Colborne, Ontario), the city still largely conforms to Clement's arguments concerning the persistent international market dependence of resource extracting communities.¹⁵ Nickel, the region's primary export, also made Sudbury quite reliant on the expansion of military power. Indeed, Inco's rapid growth and success,

13. D. Leadbeater (ed.) *Mining Town Crisis: Globalization, Labour and Resistance in Sudbury*, Fernwood, Halifax, 2008; C.M. Wallace, A. Thomson (eds.) *Sudbury: Rail Town to Regional Capital*, Dundurn, Toronto, 1993.

14. W. Clement, *Hardrock Mining: Industrial Relations and Technological Changes at Inco*, McClelland and Stewart, Toronto, 1981, 43-45; J. Swift, *Inco at Home and Abroad*, Between the Lines, Kitchener, 1977, 20-24.

15. W. Clement, *Debates and Directions: A Political Economy of Resources*, in W. Clement and G. Williams (eds.) *The New Canadian Political Economy*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, Kingston, 1989, 36-53.

as well as its ability to set monopoly prices into the early 1970s, was in part a by-product of the exponential growth of the United States military and the role of nickel in armament manufacturing.¹⁶ From the end of the Second World War through the Vietnam War, Inco's researchers and marketing personnel sought further consumer applications for nickel, but the linkages to arms and government contracts remained vital.¹⁷

After decades of struggle and several defeats, workers were able to unionize the mines in 1944 as local 598 of the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers (Mine-Mill).¹⁸ A militant union of international repute, Mine-Mill was also a victim of the emerging Cold War and subjected to severe repression from the company, government and local authorities, as well as central labour bodies for its ostensible Communist affiliations.¹⁹ Following a series of raids, persistent red-baiting, and bitter inter-union fights at the local, national, and international levels, the United Steelworkers of America (USW) Local 6500 defeated and replaced Mine-Mill as the bargaining agent for workers at Inco in Sudbury after a contested Ontario Labour Relations Board vote in 1962.²⁰ The persistent legacy and lore surrounding Mine-Mill is matched perhaps only by the bitterness left by this dark episode in Canadian labour history. Both can be found in equal measure in books and oral histories on Sudbury,²¹ as well as in the accounts of workers of

16. Swift, *op. cit.*, 27-31.

17. On this and other issues pertaining to Inco's growth and technological development see United Steelworkers of America, *Technological Change at Inco and its Impact on Workers*, United Steelworkers of America Local 6500, Sudbury, 1987.

18. Mine-Mill/UAW 598 remains as the much-diminished bargaining unit at Xstrata (formerly Falconbridge) in Sudbury, having voted in the early 1960s against joining the United Steelworkers of America. See J.B. Lang, *One Hundred Years of Mine Mill*, in M. Steedman, P. Suschnigg and D. K. Buse (eds.) *Hard Lessons: The Mine Mill Union in the Canadian Labour Movement*, Dundurn, Toronto, 1995, 13-20; and B. Palmer, *Small Unions and Dissidents in the History of Canadian Trade Unionism*, in Steedman, Suschnigg and Buse, *op. cit.*, 39-49.

19. J. Lang, *A Lion in a Den of Daniels: A History of the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers in Sudbury, Ontario, 1942-1962*, Master's Thesis: University of Guelph, 1970; Palmer, *op. cit.*

20. I. Abella, *Nationalism, Communism, and Canadian Labour: The CIO, the Communist Party, and the Canadian Congress of Labour, 1935-1956*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1973; See also Swift, *op. cit.*, 55-59.

21. H. Brasch, *A Miner's Chronicle: Inco Ltd. and the Unions, 1944-1997*, United Steelworkers of America Local 6500, Sudbury, 1997; B. Miner, *A Miner's Life: Bob Miner and Union Organizing in Timmins, Kirkland Lake and Sudbury*, McMaster University, Hamilton, 1979; H. Seguin, *Fighting for Justice and Dignity: The Homer Seguin Story*, Self-Published, Sudbury, 2008.

various ages. It forms a piece of the complex yet proud local history that many workers in Sudbury grew up hearing and retain connections to. With the Steelworkers as the union representing workers in Sudbury, a series of fairly substantial victories on wages, benefits and pensions, health and safety, and environmental regulation were achieved, mainly through the 1960s and early 1970s.²² These victories were especially considerable given the longstanding resistance of Inco to collectively bargaining with unionized workers. A culture of solidarity was built not only within the union, but also more broadly in a community highly dependent on a single industry and a large, powerful employer. However, beginning in the mid 1970s both the conditions that allowed Inco to attain monopoly dominance in the nickel market, and provided the space within which USW 6500 could win, began to change. Several factors converged that began to transform the shape of mining in Sudbury. First, emerging international competition from newly independent former colonies undermined Inco's monopoly position and sent it searching for nickel deposits in developing countries, such as Guatemala and Indonesia.²³ Though the quality and purity of the resources in these new acquisitions was poorer than in Sudbury, the power to undermine and threaten the conditions of Sudbury workers was nonetheless enhanced. Second, overzealous projections from both governments and industry experts concerning long-term world demand for nickel saw Inco make enormous capital expenditures and take on considerable debt. As the 1970s wore on, supply began to outstrip demand consistently, causing price drops and revenue shrinkage.²⁴ Last, and perhaps most importantly, the success of the union in extracting relatively high wages and pensions, health, safety and workplace rights, and some environmental protections, encouraged Inco to pursue strategies for containing labour and reasserting its dominance. Expanding its international footprint was one, but more important was the process of transforming the workplace through massive capital investment, mechanization and automation, de-skilling and work reorganization,²⁵ and the attendant reduction of the labour force from a peak of over 20,000 in 1971, down to fewer than 3,000 by the

22. G.H. Gilchrist, *As Strong as Steel*, United Steelworkers of America Local 6500, Sudbury, 1999; Seguin, *op. cit.*

23. Swift, *op. cit.*, 63-99.

24. United Steelworkers of America, *Technological Change at Inco*.

25. Clement, *Hardrock Mining*, 156-162.

2009 strike.²⁶ Added to this was early collective agreement language that opened the window for the company to utilize contract, non-union firms and workers, a practice that would later be expanded considerably under Vale.²⁷

3. Enter Vale and the 2009-2010 Strike

The processes transforming the political economy of mining described above continued into the 2000s, as Sudbury attempted to diversify its economy and unions sought to maintain conditions for members amidst major declines in employment. However, a series of takeovers and acquisitions further reorganized the industry in the mid decade. Brazilian conglomerate CVRD (known as Vale in Sudbury) and the Swiss equity firm Xstrata PLC purchased the Canadian nickel producers Inco and Falconbridge in 2006.²⁸ These takeovers were representative of a global pattern of large mergers and acquisitions that greatly increased capital concentration in the mining industry,²⁹ and saw emerging market

26. The frequent layoffs and shutdowns in the industry, even through its high growth years, make exact employment numbers difficult to report. As well, the company has used attrition extensively to reduce its number of employees, on top of relying on pension buyouts and workers quitting in frustration or desperation during shutdowns or prolonged strikes. See D. Robinson, *Employment Numbers for Inco/Vale and Falconbridge/Xstrata in Sudbury (1928 to 2010)*, *Labourforce Data Network*, Institute for Northern Ontario Research and Development (INORD), Laurentian University, Sudbury; and Peters, *op. cit.*

27. R. Roth, M. Steedman, S. Condratto, *The Casualization of Work and the Rise of Precariousness in Sudbury's Nickel Mining Industry*, Unpublished paper, http://www.ilpc.org.uk/Portals/56/ilpc2015-paperupload/ILPC2015paper-Roth,%20Steedman,%20Condratto%20-%20The%20Casualization%20of%20Work%20and%20the%20Rise%20of%20Precariousness%20in%20Canada%E2%80%99s%20Nickel%20Mining%20Industry%2020150225_043113.pdf

28. Vale, formally Vale-Inco and Inco Limited, was initially to be operated as a mining division apart from CVRD's other operations, according to the stipulations set down by Investment Canada, the government body responsible for overseeing foreign acquisitions. However, as of 2007 all former Inco operations, with the exception of its nickel alloy manufacturing site, are a wholly owned subsidiary of CVRD (Vale). Xstrata, which before the takeover owned twenty percent of shares, acquired the remainder of Falconbridge in a frenzy of bids, counter-bids, and withdrawals between 2005 and late 2006.

29. Leadbeater, *op. cit.*, particularly his *Introduction*, 32-36; and D. Leadbeater (ed.) *Resources, Empire and Labour: Crises, Lessons and Alternatives*, Fernwood, Halifax, 2014.

economies move capital into wealthier nations.³⁰ Taking advantage of credit expansion prior to the 2008 financial crisis and the prospect of rising resource prices amid scarcity, firms such as Vale purchased mines and mining infrastructure on a global scale, including those in Sudbury.³¹ Vale thus entered Canada as part of a project of economic restructuring and ownership concentration in the mining industry, coupled with neoliberal policies undertaken by both the Ontario and Canadian governments, ostensibly meant to attract foreign investment.³² As one commentator at the time pointed out, government was encouraging foreign capital's entry into Canada under the premise that it would make national businesses more competitive and beat the "industrial retreat" common across developed nations.³³ As Stanford argues, this neoliberal policy orientation was in a certain sense a return to an older orthodoxy, namely, that rather than local and national economic investment and regulation, foreign capital and global competition were key to Canada's economic success.³⁴

Foreign acquisition and the quest for competitive advantage had nearly immediate deleterious consequences for labour relations in Sudbury. Vale in particular made it publically known that it considered labour cost reductions essential to the profitability of its new Canadian operations.³⁵ The onset of the 2008 financial crisis made this claim seem plausible, particularly given the debt burden Vale had accumulated in anticipation of rising resource prices. Though the crisis depressed nickel and other resource prices and seemed to pose challenges for Vale, recovery was swift. Its various efforts to reduce costs through layoffs, shutdowns and other supply reductions, as well as cuts to new capital expenditures, proved effective at weathering the recession. Indeed, as demand picked up in 2009, it appeared that "the global mining industry [was] stronger than

30. V. Fontes, *BRICS, Capitalist-Imperialism and New Contradictions*, in P. Bond and A. Garcia (eds.) *BRICS: An Anti-Capitalist Critique*, Haymarket, Chicago, 2015, 27-44; V. Fontes, A. Garcia, *Brazil's New Imperial Capitalism*, *Socialist Register*, 2014, 207-226.

31. See R. Moody, *Rocks and Hard Places: The Globalization of Mining*, Fernwood, Halifax, 2007.

32. Leadbeater, *Mining Town Crisis*, 22-26; G. McCormack, T. Workman, *The Servant State: Overseeing Capital Accumulation in Canada*, Fernwood, Halifax, 2015, 51-60; Peters, *op. cit.*, 80-85.

33. D. Olive, *Canada Beating Industrial Retreat*, *Toronto Star*, May 13, 2007.

34. J. Stanford, *Staples, Deindustrialization, and Foreign Investment: Canada's Economic Journey Back to the Future*, *Studies in Political Economy*, vol. 82, Autumn, 2008, 7-35.

35. C. Mulligan, *Union Steels itself for Strike, as Profitable Vale Insists on Major Concessions*, *Sudbury Star*, July 9, 2009.

ever.”³⁶ However, as the collective agreement with USW 6500 expired, Vale continued to pursue extensive concessions from the union. The company sought further layoffs, increased flexibility through the use of contract firms and workers, as well as reductions in employee bonuses, and an end to the defined-benefit pension scheme for new hires.³⁷

As bargaining produced no acceptable agreement, Vale settled in for a conflict.³⁸ After an eight-week shutdown imposed by the company as part of its strategy to remain profitable during the recession, on July 13, 2009, USW 6500 went out on a strike that would last nearly a year.

After outflanking the union in the local and national media and tying it up in court with injunctions and considerable fines, Vale emerged from the confrontation victorious. Though the Steelworkers forged international alliances beyond their North American membership base, they were unable to either mobilize broad community support or effectively counter Vale’s global power and reach. Union officials’ call for a “unity accord” between Vale workers globally, although a strategic step in the right direction, ultimately exemplified the difficulty of facing down a multinational corporation explicitly committed to weakening unions in Sudbury and beyond.³⁹

4. Remembering the Strike

The strike at Vale in 2009-2010 was the longest in the history of mining in Sudbury.⁴⁰ This is all the more remarkable when considered against the typically sparse numbers of workers involved and shortness of strikes in Canada.⁴¹ While strikes at the mines in Sudbury are fairly frequent,⁴² the uniqueness and bitterness of this particular conflict was apparent from the start. The company’s willingness to run operations with replacement workers, its messaging in local and national media, and its provocative use

³⁶ Peters, *op. cit.*, 87.

³⁷ E. Rocha, *Sudbury Inco Miners Strike*, *Toronto Star*, July 13, 2009.

³⁸ C. Mulligan, *Strike at Vale Inco Looms*, *Sudbury Star*, July 12, 2009.

³⁹ H. Brasch, *Winds of Change: The Local 6500 USW Strike of 2009 to 2010*, Self-Published, Dowling, 2010; United Steelworkers of America, *Press Release*, July 22, 2009, in author’s possession.

⁴⁰ H. Brasch, *Mining Then and Now in the Sudbury Basin*, Self-Published, Dowling, 2007; Peters, *op. cit.*, 74.

⁴¹ L. Briskin, *From Person-Days Lost to Labour Militancy: A New Look at the Canadian Work Stoppages Data, Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations*, vol. 62, 2007, 31-65.

⁴² There have been seven strikes by the United Steelworkers against Inco since the divisive wildcat strike of 1966. See Brasch, *Mining Then and Now*, and Seguin, *op. cit.*

of fines and injunctions signalled that Vale was prepared to fight a considerable battle to set a new tone for labour relations in its mines and processing facilities.⁴³

Workers of all ages interviewed for this study recalled what they described as Vale's bombastic arrival in Sudbury. Stories with local currency, such as Vale managers supposedly marvelling at the trucks that workers were able to afford, illustrated the company's intention to roll back the living standards of its new workforce. If workers were consistent in their appraisal of Vale's anti-labour ambitions, they were not in agreement over the memory of the strike. How and why did workers of different ages remember and talk about the strike in such contrasting ways? For older workers and retirees, the strike, though a loss in terms of some of the concessionary givebacks of the final collective agreement, was also a partial success. When older workers described the strike, 10 of 11 told particular stories about resistance or conflict on the picket line. One described taunting a truck driver crossing the picket line:

“C'mon, get out and stand with us, if you think you got it in you!” (55 years old)

Another recalled he and other workers reminiscing about how “scabs” were handled “years ago:”

“...with spray-paint on their garage doors or tacks in their driveways.” (60 years old)

And one retiree, who had spent time on the picket line in solidarity, when asked what he remembered about the strike, simply replied:

“It wasn't a bad strike, that one. We had a lot of fun on the picket line [laughing].” (74 years old)

43. Estimates are that Vale ran at approximately 30 percent capacity throughout the strike, based on Peters, *op. cit.*, 74 interview with a retired mine manager. This was unprecedented. Though there is no legislation prohibiting the use of replacement workers during labour conflicts in Ontario, Inco had hitherto only sold accumulated stockpiles and performed maintenance operations during strikes or lockouts. See also T. Van Alphen, *Striking Union Outraged with Inco Vow to Start Production*, *Toronto Star*, August 26, 2009.

In many of their comments, staying out and standing together represented at least a partial success.

“You know, everybody used to just say ‘we’re gonna win.’ They were there to stay, you know? It was long, but the workers did. Now, the company came back afterward and got stuff here and there. There were a lot of repercussions afterwards. They came out with a lot of different rules and everything else about the workplace and that...” (55 years old)

Other older workers and retirees told similar stories, representing the determination of the strikers as a form of success (staying out was even described as a vague ‘win,’ as above, in three instances).

For younger workers, the memory of the strike represents a considerable loss, one in which they are unsure even of the clarity or soundness of the objective. “It was brutal,” remembers one worker,

“I’m still paying off all the debt we [his family] racked up from that.” (36 years old)

And another:

“Honestly, I don’t see the point. The union pumped all these guys up at Garson Arena and that. And then the strike...and they lose all this stuff. Like, they got stuff taken away last strike. Stuff that my dad fought for, that these same old timers fought for. I still don’t get it. What was that?” (32 years old)

Younger workers were more likely to describe economic hardships, debts or other burdens resulting from the strike, than they were to recount picket line stories of solidarity and steadfastness.

The issue of pensions is perhaps the clearest point of contention around which memories of the strike diverge. This is understandable. The new collective agreement ended defined-benefit pensions for new hires, putting in place a two-tiered system in which younger workers will have access to a defined-contribution plan, but assume the majority of the risk for pension investments.⁴⁴ This creates a divisive, tiered system, and

44. Vale/United Steelworkers of America Local 6500, *Collective Bargaining Agreement*; T. Van Alphen, *Vale Inco Workers End Bitter, Year-Long Strike*, *Toronto Star*, July 9, 2010.

exacerbates generational tension as younger workers blame older workers and retirees for not protecting their futures. Compare the comments of a worker with two years on the job to that of a former union executive member:

“To me, it seemed like a sell-out, a major giveaway. I guess it’s [his pension plan] like an investment, but who knows about those, right? I guess a lot of older guys got their pensions secure and maybe that’s all they cared about.” (32 years old)

[...]

“The pensions, you see, it was too expensive for the company, which I understand. When you have so many more people on a pension, you can’t be profitable like that. In some ways, the new system is better. Each makes the contribution and it’s there for you at the end...”

“But it’s also a lot riskier, no?”

“It is risky, no doubt. But under the circumstances, they [the bargaining team] had to make that decision.” (56 years old)

Pensions offer one example among a host of others that are representative of the growing precariousness of mining employment in Sudbury – a precariousness that is hitting younger workers much harder.⁴⁵ When older workers and retirees remember and assess the strike, they do so through a class lens, from a normative set of material conditions. Their formative work years, and the majority of their experiences of employment, unions, and labour relations took place during a period of growing union power and improving living standards.⁴⁶ The relative prosperity that incremental improvements secured for miners in Sudbury encouraged expectations of fairly high levels of employment and material security, even in an industry plagued by cycles of boom and bust. Moreover, a strong union able to offer protection and deliver benefits to its members was an integral part of this. Workers who entered the labour force during this time faced a situation much different to the one encountered by a new generation of younger workers. Global

45. Roth, Steedman, Condratto, *op. cit.*

46. G. Hallsworth, P. Hallsworth, *The 1960s*, in C.M. Wallace and A. Thomson (eds.) *Sudbury: Rail Town to Regional Capital*, Dundurn, Toronto, 1993, 215-241; Seguin, *op. cit.*

competitiveness, downsizing, mechanization and automation, efforts by new owners to restructure and introduce insecure contractual work, attacks on pensions, and other material difficulties leave young miners vulnerable and uncertain. How class position shapes memory is thus dependent on the balance of class forces and the class relations that are characteristic of the speaker's formative work years, or what Camfield calls the "class formation."⁴⁷ In this sense, we must understand class as a set of material conditions and relations emergent in particular historical circumstances.⁴⁸ Workers in Sudbury remember the strike not as an event detached from their broader lived experiences, but as part of a story about what it means to be working class in Sudbury – a meaning which is largely dependent on the historical, material, and social conditions out of which class identities form.⁴⁹

5. Narrating the Strike

The memory of an event is intimately tied to that which precedes and follows it. As Portelli shows in his classic study of the oral histories of Italian workers, the historical sequences into which narrators place events tell stories about how the past and future interact.⁵⁰ In our case, workers' class identities and the social circumstances out of which they were formed shape both the direction of the stories and the strike's place within them. However, to understand how this happens, class must be appreciated for its historical and institutional specificities, as a set of social relations produced under particular historical circumstances of power, contestation, and lived experience.⁵¹ When older workers or retirees tell their stories of the strike, or when they compare it to previous strikes, legal or wildcat, they do so from a place that allows comparative

47. D. Camfield, *Re-Orienting Class Analysis: Working Classes as Historical Formations*, *Science and Society*, vol. 68, no. 4, 2005/2005, 421-446, 424.

48. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin, New York, 1982, 8-13; E.M. Wood, *Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism*, Verso, London, 2015, 76-100.

49. S. High, 'They Were Making Good Money, Just Ten Minutes from Home': Proximity and Distance in the Plant Shutdown Stories of Northern Ontario Mill Workers, *Labour/Le Travail*, vol. 76, Fall, 2015, 11-36; A. Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*, SUNY Press, Albany, 1991.

50. Portelli, *op. cit.*

51. See also J. Kirk, *Class, Culture and Social Change: On the Trail of the Working Class*, Palgrave MacMillan, London, 2007.

reflection. They measure the recent strike against prior ones for uniqueness or similarity.

“Vale is a different bird altogether. We’ve got a big fight ahead of us. But it’s not like we haven’t did that before.” (65 years old)

[...]

“I think we’ve gotta stick together, that’s all. Shut them down, like we used to do.” (52 years old)

[...]

“The last strike didn’t seem like people had the fight like I remember from when I was younger.” (72 years old)

The trend of their evaluations is to see the strike as a setback. Workers fought hard, and this in itself is admirable and worth celebration. But the strike represents the need to remain determined, to fight harder, and to recalibrate union strategy against changing global circumstances.

The historical narrative into which the strike fits is characterized by the upward, linear improvement of working class conditions in the mines. Whether on matters of pay, benefits and working conditions, or health and safety, older workers and the union that represents them have engaged in a determined effort to ameliorate the worst of an inevitably difficult and dangerous industry. The same narrative fills the pages of local histories and autobiographies--books that several workers proudly kept on their shelves or coffee tables.⁵² The outcome of the strike is a bitter pill to swallow, and in some cases sits uneasily beside an emphasis on the admirable determination of the strikers. The company is at fault. The union, though perhaps responsible for strategic missteps, is not blamed for the shortcomings of the collective agreement, and is capable of refining its approach and meeting the challenge of Vale “next time around.” If certain expectations must be adjusted, such as on pensions, the general trend is toward working class improvement, which does not preclude setbacks as part of the process. The future, implicitly or explicitly, is open insofar as workers are able to “stick together” and “fight.” This is the narrative into which older workers place the 2009-2010 strike.

52. Brasch, *Winds of Change*; Miner, *op. cit.*; Seguin, *op. cit.*

Younger workers' discussion of the strike's place in history can be classified as falling into two categories: for some workers the strike was a complete rupture with a past that is closed to them; in other workers' accounts, the strike (particularly for one worker who was hired after) was not worth it, or is a past event to which they are ambivalent.

Two workers, who had both previously worked as non-union contractors, described the conditions enjoyed by earlier generations as unlikely to return:

“Things have changed a lot, as far as I hear. I’m happy to have secure work...but I don’t think it’s gonna be like the guys say it was when they started.” (32 years old)

[...]

“I’m just waiting to see what we lose next time [bargaining]. Honestly, since Vale, it seems like everything, health and safety, pay, everything, is going downhill.” (29 years old)

In the narratives of these workers, the strike was an unsuccessful attempt to maintain the standards of those who came before them.

In young workers' accounts, the material security enjoyed by older workmates or family members is either over or unlikely to return. Rather than a linear process of incremental improvement, younger workers are beginning their work lives amid uncertainty, declining employment opportunities, and with a new employer seemingly determined to bend unions to its will. They are working during a downhill slide, and there seems to be little that they or a union they feel increasingly disconnected from, can do to stop it. The strike forms a turning point in their narratives. And, unfortunately for them, they enter this story after the turning point. Though conditions might have been worsening for some time, particularly as the increased technological efficiency of the industry diminished labour needs,⁵³ the strike stands as a definitive event that both confirms the general downward trend, and prevents a reversal that would benefit workers.

The second common theme in younger workers' narrative of the strike concerns what they see as its futility. In some cases, the latter appeared as a general ambivalence to the strike as an event, and toward the union in the aftermath of the strike.

⁵³. Clement, *Hardrock Mining*.

“I know that the union is there if I need it, but like, I just don’t feel any connection on a day-to-day basis. Especially, after the strike, I was pissed. A lot of guys I know around the job were pissed. It was basically, like, don’t talk about the union or whatever.” (32 years old)

[...]

“I guess on health and safety, the right to refuse unsafe work is good, but the strike was insane. I feel like guys were led into a mess. And now, like, there’s an office [at work], and I don’t remember the last time I saw a union guy in there.” (29 years old)

[...]

“The union doesn’t feel like it’s for me. I wasn’t on strike, but I hear from guys, it was a loss. I stay away from all that [union meetings and activity]. Honestly, it seems like a bunch of whining.” (31 years old)

The outcome of the strike has left them in some cases angry at, and in other cases indifferent toward, the union. Younger workers express feelings of disconnection and dismissiveness. The institution which some of them still nonetheless acknowledge is there to represent their interests, seems inadequate and uninterested in doing so. As we will see below, narrating the strike in this way, i.e. as indicative of the growing precariousness in the mining industry and the worsening conditions into which they are entering, leaves younger workers with diminished expectations.

6. Lowered Expectations

Concerns about Vale’s environmental and labour records cut across age groups. This is not surprising given some of the bad press Vale received before, during, and after the strike.⁵⁴ However, the age of workers again

⁵⁴ M. Acharya, T. Yew, *Inco Strikers Bring Beefs, Nickels to Bay St.: Toronto Protest Aims to Sway Headquarters in Brazil*, *Toronto Star*, September 23, 2009; L. Diebel, *Bitter Standoff Grinds Down Company Town*, *Toronto Star*, June 6, 2010; Mulligan, *Nobody Voted for that Contract*.

plays a key role in explaining divergent narratives, both in terms of what can be achieved, and the means through which to accomplish change. The question of how the union can counter Vale's global power is a particularly illustrative example of the variation in the responses of older and younger workers. Older workers stressed the need to meet the company across the global terrain where it operates.

“We gotta take action. If they strike somewhere else, then we gotta shut ‘em down here. If Vale is global, then we have to be global too.” (56 years old)

[...]

“These guys [the company] need to be shown that workers won't take it. It's no different than the way we used to do it. We have to support each other. In Brazil, Mexico, Africa, you know?” (50 years old)

In struggling against a new, global employer, unionized workers need to extend the tactics that they previously deployed regionally and sometimes nationally. While willing to acknowledge the logistical difficulties in meeting these new challenges (“We can't just go to meetings and talk all this shit... when are we gonna take action?”), ultimately, hard bargaining, striking, and solidarity constitute the standard repertoire for accomplishing working class victories. Against the backdrop of their work histories and union experiences, older miners express further expectations of material security, as well as acceptance of the need to continually struggle to maintain this. Collective action, “the way we used to do it,” remains the answer to company intransigence in the narratives of these workers. What is lacking is a new, global application of these tactics. Younger workers share their older colleagues' concerns about Vale, but they describe its actions against workers in other countries and its poor environmental record⁵⁵ not as evidence of the necessity to fight back, but instead to illustrate the potential futures of workers and the community in Sudbury. There is a sense of resignation and passivity in their accounts.

⁵⁵ J. Marshall, *Behind the Image of South-South Solidarity at Brazil's Vale*, in P. Bond and A. Garcia (eds.) *BRICS: An Anti-Capitalist Critique*, Haymarket, Chicago, 2015, 162-187.

“It’s gonna be like over in China when a mine collapses and hundreds of people die. That’s the mentality of Vale, it seems. ‘Just bring in new guys, who cares?’” (28 years old)

[...]

“Vale’s health and safety, they don’t care. I guess in Brazil you can pay people two dollars a day and that. This is Canada though, but they don’t get that, I guess.” (31 years old)

Younger workers often preclude engagement with the union and express a general disillusionment.

“I don’t pay attention to the union.” (28 years old)

[...]

“Honestly, I don’t have much to say about it [the union]. I just stay away.” (31 years old)

[...]

“I don’t go to meetings or anything.” (26 years old)

These are common responses to questions about the union as a vehicle for challenging the eroding conditions at work. In one particularly contradictory response, the 26 year-old worker above, who serves as a health and safety representative, explained how he had no interest in the union.

“I like health and safety. It’s important. We needed someone for joint health and safety, so I volunteered... A lot of times I have to walk these dummies around from Vale when they come and tell them what they need to hear. But most of the time, I feel like I’m actually making sure guys, especially new labourers, aren’t getting hurt or killed, or doing dumb stuff like sticking their head in the crusher... The union just seems like a bunch of guys whining though. The last negotiation [2015] was garbage. The wage increase wasn’t high enough. I voted ‘no.’”

In his eyes, a health and safety representative, a union position, is important. But the union is not a place for him. He did not attend

meetings, and would not in the future--unless to show up briefly and vote against a subpar contract.

For another worker, escape was preferable to fighting back, should things go badly in the next round of bargaining.

“The next time we go into bargaining, I’m gonna be the first one outta town, north, finding work in the gold mines maybe or something, until it’s over.” (29 years old)

Though work in the mines remains relatively well compensated, many younger workers’ paths to secure employment have not been straightforward. Indeed, job opportunities in mining have shrunk considerably, due both to technological improvements, as well as contracting out positions to non-union firms. Younger workers see diminishing opportunities and the negative consequences at work and in the community, and they have adjusted their expectations downward. Furthermore, the union, unable to mobilize effectively against these trends, does not appear in their narratives to hold the potential to reverse course. And importantly, none expressed a desire to become more active in the union to challenge the issues they described.

7. Conclusion

The 2009-2010 strike at Vale was a historic event for Sudbury, USW Local 6500, and the Canadian labour movement more broadly. While in many respects Vale accelerated changes begun under Inco’s ownership, in other ways the former’s ruthlessness and seemingly unyielding attacks on labour had a flavour all their own. John Fera, Local 6500 President during the strike, commented in exasperation, “I don’t think they speak the same language as us.” Alliances were strengthened with former union rival Mine-Mill 598 (still representing workers at Falconbridge/Xstrata mines), and new connections built with Vale workers from around the globe, but constraining the company proved exceedingly difficult. As one commentator remarked after the strike, it seemed as though it was “Sudbury against the world.”⁵⁶

The difficulties of the strike call for serious reflection, within the union, across its many alliances, and in the broader labour movement. Unions face new and growing challenges in a globalized economy, and a

⁵⁶ J. Gray, *Nickelled and Damned*, *Globe and Mail*, March 25, 2010.

substantial literature exists attempting to identify effective strategies, tactics, and programs for union renewal and revitalization.⁵⁷ But as Turner points out, “union strategies...can be analysed both as dependent and independent variables.”⁵⁸ In other words, while the types of strategies unions undertake matter in terms of outcomes, successful strategies are also dependent on factors of mobilization, solidarity, and commitment. This article has sought to highlight the challenges to member mobilization and engagement by using workers’ memories and narratives of the most recent strike in Sudbury as a window onto these issues. I have argued that the differences in older and younger workers’ memories of the strike result from their historically specific class identities, and that these shape the meaning workers give to the strike, their future expectations, and their assessments of the utility of collective action.

I suggest that we situate the above in relation to research on the role of union democracy in projects of renewal. If, as Ross suggests, effective and resilient social unionism requires greater membership control over their unions and organizations,⁵⁹ then we must engage in critical examinations of factors which impede the level of participation necessary to actualize this. Moreover, such investigations must address the dialectal relationship between organizational forms and membership subjectivity. Local 6500 in Sudbury, a union with both a tradition of rank-and-file militancy and aspects of business union style leadership,⁶⁰ now also contains younger workers who feel shut out from the gains of their predecessors, and cast aside in an uncertain, global economy. To speak simply of increasing union democracy and member engagement without an appreciation of the perspectives and situations from which workers come may prove ineffective and counterproductive, particularly if such a strategy does not address issues of intergenerational tension. This particular union local, like many others, finds itself in an unenviable position: the union’s very capacities to mobilize broad participation and engagement are undermined by the company’s ability to extract concessions that divide workers. Yet its capitulation to these demands for cost reductions through

57. K. Bronfenbrenner *et al.* (eds.), *Organizing to Win: New Research on Union Strategies*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1998; Fairbrother, Yates, *op. cit.*; Frege, Kelly, *op. cit.*; Milkman, Voss, *op. cit.*

58. L. Turner, *From Transformation to Revitalization: A New Research Agenda for a Contested Global Economy*, *Work and Occupations*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2005, 383-399, 385.

59. Ross, *op. cit.*

60. B. McKeigan, *The Rise and Decline of Local 6500 United Steelworkers of America*, in D. Leadbeater (ed.) *Mining Town Crisis: Globalization, Labour and Resistance in Sudbury*, Fernwood, Halifax, 2008, 224-259.

a segmented labour force contributes to its inability to resist. Given the growth of such “tiered” workforces and contracts, many unions will face similar issues.⁶¹

Last, the union’s institutional culture and history, forged through decades of struggle, while essential for building and maintaining solidarity, can also be a stumbling block insofar as it hinders innovative thinking and strategizing. As Yates argues, “unions are not mere mirrors reflecting the composition and demands of their members. Rather, they are active agents in defining the interests and shaping the world view of their members.”⁶² In this they are tasked with the formidable job of building and solidifying collective identities.⁶³ How the union can draw on its vibrant tradition and institutional capacity, while also addressing the material difficulties new members face while building solidarity, locally and globally, are questions it cannot afford to overlook.

⁶¹. For example, see Rosenfeld’s discussion of the last contract negotiations between Unifor and the big-three automakers in Ontario. “Grow-in” wage structures and an end to defined-benefit pensions for new hires are now in place in auto as well. H. Rosenfeld, *Ford and Unifor Reach Agreement Despite Opposition to Two-Tier*, *Rankandfile.ca*, November 8, 2016. Accessed June 23, 2017. <http://rankandfile.ca/2016/11/08/ford-and-unifor-reach-agreement-despite-opposition-to-two-tier/>

⁶². C.A.B. Yates, *Unity and Diversity: Challenges to an Expanding Canadian Autoworkers’ Union*, *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, vol. 35, no. 1, 1998, 93-118, 116.

⁶³. Lévesque, Murray, Le Queux, *op. cit.*

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