THE STATE AND ECONOMIC LIFE

EDITORS: Mel Watkins, University of Toronto; Leo Panitch, Carleton University

5 LAUREL SEFTON MACDOWELL

'Remember Kirkland Lake' The Gold Miners' Strike of 1941–42

On 18 November 1941, the gold miners of Kirkland Lake struck for union recognition. The Kirkland Lake strike was a bitter struggle between the mine operators and their employees and became a national confrontation between the federal government and the labour movement over the issue of collective bargaining.

Locally, the dispute was affected by the company-town environment and by the mine operators' paternalistic view of labour relations. Through the difficult winter months, the community – polarized by the events – tried to deal with both the 'political' and social impact of the conflict. The author's father, Larry Sefton, emerged as one of the local leaders of the strike, which itself was a training ground for many future trade unionists.

The strike was waged in the special circumstances of the war economy, and was a microcosm of wartime developments, which produced unprecedented union growth, serious industrial unrest, hostile management response, and generally antagonistic labour/government relations.

Professor MacDowell shows that, even though the strike was lost, its eventual effect on labour policy gave the dispute its particular significance. To win the strike, government intervention and the introduction of collective bargaining were necessary, yet the only intervention was by the Ontario Provincial Police, who were ordered to assist the mining companies to operate with strike-breakers. The federal government refused to intervene, in spite of virtually unanimous support for the strike by the Canadian labour movement.

MacDowell concludes that the strike succeeded in unifying organized labour behind the demand for collective-bargaining legislation. It highlighted the inadequacy of the government's wartime labour policy, and ultimately forced the government to authorize collective bargaining, first for Crown companies and then for all industrial workers. Thus, the Kirkland Lake strike was not only an important wartime dispute affecting policy development, but it also established a special legacy for trade unionists as part of the history of their movement.

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