

**Profits, Power, and Principle:
The Case of the Giant Mine Strike**

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*“Roger Warren, Giant Mine bomber who killed 9, granted full parole”
–Richard Gleeson, CBC News¹*

Introduction

The news articles I had found through what started as a casual Google search on the Giant Mine Strike left me in disbelief. How had I lived all these years in Yellowknife and never heard anybody recount the strike and the tale of the Giant Mine explosion that killed nine miners in 1992? As I read on about the strike and the bloody conflicts, the words seemed foreign as they jumped out from the screen—riots, police, tear-gas, attack dogs, gunfire. As I made my way further through the archive of people’s stories from the strike, I began to realize how much had been on the line for everybody involved. This essay uses the Giant Mine Strike as a case study to explore why it is that unions feel it is necessary at times to strike, and how the employer, the union and members are affected.

Background on the Giant Mine Strike

May 1992 was the start of the Giant Mine Strike, a labour dispute that lasted 18 months between Royal Oak Mines Inc. and the local four chapter of the Canadian Association of Smelter and Allied Workers (CASAW) representing the local miners.² At the start of the strike, the mining company immediately flew in replacement workers to continue operations, and hired a

¹ Gleeson, Richard. “Roger Warren, Giant Mine bomber who killed 9, granted full parole.” CBC News. September 20, 2017. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/roger-warren-full-parole-1.4297749>. Accessed May 31, 2018.

² University of Toronto Libraries, Research Guides. “Giant Mine Strike 1992-1993.” Last updated May 31, 2018. <https://guides.library.utoronto.ca/c.php?g=250906&p=1680322>. Accessed May 31, 2018.

private security company to protect the mine.³ The labour dispute carried on, punctuated by cases of violence, such as in June 1992 when the RCMP and private security forces came head to head with strikers that had torn down a mine fence and rushed onto the grounds.⁴ The deadliest action came on September 18, 1992, when Roger Warren, one of the striking miners set off an underground blast in the mine that killed nine workers.⁵ The strike ended, with mining workers returning to work in December 1993.⁶

Why the Union Felt it was Necessary to Take Strike Action

The factors that led CASAW to choose to go on strike are common to many labour disputes, and demonstrate why it is necessary at times for unions to take strike action. Royal Oak Mines wanted to reduce workers' pay in response to the decline in the market for gold.⁷ From a union's perspective, this is an unacceptable move from an employer. Ultimately, the *raison d'être* of unions is to stand up for workers' rights to fair conditions of work, including equitable wages.⁸ After negotiations had reached an impasse regarding wages, a strike was arguably the most powerful action CASAW could impose.

Impact the Strike had on the Employer, Union, and Members

The Giant Mine Strike demonstrates that strikes can have a profound impact on the employer, union and members, with each side making choices in response to the other's moves. The case of the Giant Mine Strike was a deadly game of escalation. The immediate obvious impact that the strike had for Royal Oak Mines was that it threatened to cut into its profits.

³Ibid.

⁴ Laidlaw, Katherine. "Archives: The Murders In the Mine." *Up Here Magazine*. September 2012. <https://uphere.ca/articles/archives-murders-mine>. Accessed May 31, 2018.

⁵ Gleeson, Richard 2017; Laidlaw, Katherine 2012.

⁶ Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada. "History of Giant Mine." <http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100027388/1100100027390>. Accessed May 31, 2018.

⁷ University of Toronto Libraries, Research Guides, 2018.

⁸ Canadian Labour Congress. Why Unions? <http://canadianlabour.ca/why-unions>. Accessed, June 5, 2018.

Royal Oak Mines responded to this corporate fear through flying in replacement workers and private security forces.⁹ It was a blunt show of power, and escalated the conflict quickly.

The Union and many of its members held steadfast during the strike, bound by principle and justice for the workers. The Giant Mine Strike demonstrated that strikes can seriously impact employers, unions and its members by inciting violence between both sides. One could argue that the strike impacted at least some of the union members to feel extreme frustration and a sense of injustice in response to Royal Oak Mines' actions. For some members the passion for principle may have been what drove them to violent confrontations with the RCMP and mining security forces, including through riots, break-ins, and vandalism at the mine.¹⁰ Some members experienced jail-time, and in the most extreme case, Warren received a life sentence for the explosive he set off that killed nine people. Warren admitted years later that the chaos of the atmosphere had affected his judgement, making him feel justified in committing violent acts.¹¹ The organizational and individual choices made during the strike had drastic implications.

Conclusion

The Giant Mine Strike had a lasting impact on the people involved and the history of Yellowknife. It is a case that shows why sometimes unions need to take strike action to defend workers' rights and demand fair working conditions from employers. It is also a case that reminds us of just how much is on the line for all parties and members involved in this mining economy, and how quickly conflict can escalate. I hope that the Giant Mine Strike and its deadly impacts are a lesson in history that we will remember in future mining labour disputes.

⁹ University of Toronto Libraries, Research Guides, 2018.

¹⁰ Laidlaw, Katherine 2012.

¹¹ Globe and Mail. "Convict confesses to Giant Mine Explosion." Published July, 2003 and updated April 18, 2018. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/convict-confesses-to-giant-mine-explosion/article1163965/>. Accessed May 31, 2018.

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