



# Mobility and choices for miners and their families: Lessons from Elliot Lake

by Suzanne Dansereau

**Mining is a mobile industry and it is becoming more so as the industry restructures in search of greater flexibility and global expansion, making mining employment more unstable. There are specific problems in the organisation of the mining industry that make the more frequent relocations required of workers and their families particularly complex. The following paper will identify these in the light of the experiences when Denison Mines and Rio Algom closed the uranium mines in Elliot Lake in Northern Ontario and more than 4 000 workers were laid-off.**

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More than 4 000 workers were laid-off from the uranium mines in Elliot Lake in Northern Ontario between 1990 and 1996 as Denison Mines and Rio Algom closed after 30 years of operation. Workers had been promised work until they retired, yet miners and their families now had to make choices about leaving Elliot Lake, the community they had built; or about changing careers when their skills are more valued in mining; or about finding a new job at other mining companies where they will start at the bottom of the seniority ladder. For many it meant coping with periods of unemployment, going through long and sometimes difficult periods of retraining or being forced into early-retirement. For the families, the adjustment was just as significant, coping with upheavals associated with relocation or lengthy separations.

Unfortunately this is not a unique story. Mining is a mobile industry and it is becoming more so as the industry restructures in search of greater flexibility and global expansion, making mining employment more unstable. While many industries are going through similar changes, there are specific problems in the organisation of the mining industry that make the more frequent relocations required of workers and their families particularly complex. The following paper will identify these in the light of the Elliot Lake experience.

This paper is based on material collected while I was part of the Elliot Lake Tracking and Adjustment Study at Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario.<sup>1</sup> The study undertook longitudinal surveys as well as focus groups to examine the adjustment process of approximately 1 000 individuals and their families as well as the impact on the community, between 1990 and 1996.

Interestingly separate series of focus groups were undertaken to address specific topics yet they all invariably resulted in a discussion of the broader reality of lay-off and living in a town that has been closing down for several years and especially the extent to which mine em-

ployees and their families had to fundamentally reorganise their lives.

Using focus groups in this context has the advantage of demonstrating the complexity of the choices facing the families and the difficulties many will have to adjust given the shortage of new jobs and the absence of other opportunities in Elliot Lake and, to a certain extent, beyond. It will also demonstrate the knowledge miners and their families have of current patterns of hiring in Canadian mining especially the inevitability of commuter mining and the difficulty of finding a new mining job given their health problems and their age.

This combined with the problems of living in a remote, single industry town contribute to the difficulty for workers and their families to simply pick up and move when a mine shuts down.

This paper will refer more specifically to a set of focus groups undertaken with miners and their spouses prior to the last lay-off in Elliot Lake – the closure of the Stanleigh mine in 1996. By talking to families about the planning they are doing in anticipation of the closure as they reflect not only on their own experiences but those of their fellow workers, we can understand the broad set of issues they have to cope with, the non-monetary costs of the dislocation as well as identify those that might be more successful or more vulnerable to the consequences of a closure.

This is in contrast to the ease with which the two mining companies involved: Denison Mines and Rio Algom have been able to restart other uranium mining operations – Denison in Saskatchewan and Rio Algom in Wisconsin, in the U.S. While this may be a novel way of understanding trends in mining employment, we will see below that by listening to the voices of miners and their families talk about their choices and their concerns over the impending changes gives us important insights into the realities they face and tells us much about workers' experience of current conditions of mining employment in Canada,

especially it's growing instability. What might also be novel is speaking to women about mining issues, usually considered a very male domain, yet as we will see below when speaking to the women we gain an understanding the depth of the effects of this dislocation as they relate the problems faced by all family members as well as a broader picture of problems facing the miners themselves.

### Elliot Lake and current hiring practices in mining

To better understand the comments made in the focus group, we will look at the context of the 1996 lay-offs and trends in hiring patterns. Workers to be laid off with the Stanleigh closure expected they would have an easier time than those laid off in 1990 and 1992 when the two companies closed the bulk of their operations: Denison Mines closed its one mine, while Rio Algom closed the Quirke and Panel mines, leaving only Stanleigh open until 1996. In addition to the longer notice period to those laid-off in 1996, they felt their chances of finding a job were better as they were among a smaller group being laid-off. Only 500 were being laid off, 200 of which were retiring or were eligible for some form of early retirement package, in contrast to the over 2 000 laid-off in 1990.<sup>2</sup>

While they knew there were still many previously laid-off Elliot Lake residents who had not found work, they seemed to be more worried about their older age as many of the Stanleigh workers were those with more seniority who had transferred from Quirke and Panel. In addition, this final lay-off occurred at a time of government cut-backs and after much of the closure compensation money had been used up. There was now less money in the government adjustment programmes and for the funding of education, re-training and relocation. In addition, there was a loss of public sector jobs in the town which affected some of the spouses of men in our study and who, for the near future at least, were expected to



be the principal bread-winners for the time being.

Limits to local job opportunities stem from the fact that Elliot Lake, like many Canadian mining towns, is a semi-remote single industry town.

Its economy revolved around the extraction and milling of one ore – uranium, with no secondary manufacturing and few links to other industrial sectors. There was little local economic diversification, and since it is situated in the pre-Cambrian shield, in the heart of the hardrock underground mining region that stretches from NorthEastern Ontario to Western Quebec, there is little regional economic diversification as most activity centers around mining and forestry.

This undoubtedly made it easier for those looking for new jobs in mining, but it made it harder for those looking outside the industry, whether they be laid off

miners or family members. The remoteness also made it more difficult for those needing to retrain or return to school given the limited educational opportunities in Elliot Lake. Finally, the remoteness combined with the extent of the shock to the municipality of 15 000 people in the single-industry town meant a fall in the value of the homes and made the decision to move and/or dispose of the house a more complex one.<sup>3</sup>

Yet in 1996 many were relatively optimistic about finding new jobs if they stayed in mining in contrast to those laid-off earlier. In 1990, and especially after the second lay-off in 1992, laid-off workers faced a difficult labour market as mining was going through another slump with total Canadian mining employment falling from just under 111 000 in 1989 to 90 000 in 1992.<sup>4</sup>

By contrast in 1996, Federal government estimates predicted an upswing.<sup>5</sup>



The choice of staying in mining was thus the first choice for many and it was made more likely because, like most Canadian miners, the Elliot Lake miners have a particular mix of education and skills consisting of relatively low levels of formal education with a high degree of industry-specific skills that are highly valued by the industry but poorly recognized outside of it. This was borne out by the fact that 45 per cent of those in our study who had found a new job had returned to mining; that rate was even higher (60 per cent) among the experienced underground hardrock miners. This often meant relocating or commuting and while for about half of those in our study this would be their first relocation, for many others it was not, and many feared it would not be their last given the growing instability in mining employment.

The closure of the Elliot Lake mines is part of a regular phenomenon in mining – frequent openings and closings of operations. Traditionally mines close when ore reserves fall below an economic level. Recently the calculations as to what is an ‘economical level’ has shifted because of the mining policy of highgrading, resulting in shorter mine lives. For example in 1991, 18 mining operations opened in Canada, 14 of which were new, but 33 closed or suspended operations. In 1992, 8 mines opened and 25 closed. It was expected that the trend for 1993 would be reversed with more openings planned than closures but for those remaining open, the life expectancy would be relatively short – nearly 30 per cent of mining companies stated that their operations would only remain open for another 5 years or less (another 37 per cent expected a life expectancy of less than 20 years). In addition, fewer miners are required to reach the economic targets and overall decline in employment has occurred without a fall in overall output.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, there is an increased use of contract companies both in terms of their number of employees and the scope of their activities, contributing significantly to the growing mobility of

miners. Contract companies are increasing their share of mining employment from one decade to the next.

Throughout the 1970s in Ontario, contract companies hired 5.43 per cent of all mine workers, but in the 1980s that increased to 8.8 per cent, and in the 1990s (1990-1996) it rose to 10.9 per cent, with a dramatic increase in 1996 to 12.6 per cent.<sup>7</sup>

Among those survey participants who have returned to mining, 30 per cent worked at some point for contract companies and well over half of these are the experienced underground miners. In the past contract companies had largely been restricted to shaft and drift development and a few other specialised activities. This is no longer the case. Instead as one company representative indicated contract miners are now being used as a mechanism to counteract fluctuating human resources needs in the industry, the result of its permanent cyclical nature.<sup>8</sup>

In addition some mines such as Shabandowan are now being completely operated by contract companies, in this case by Dynatec. It is interesting to note that many companies have now made the use of contract workers an integral part of their development plans as evidenced by the importance of the issue in both the Inco and Falconbridge strikes in Sudbury in the summer of 1997.

The issue remains a contentious one in all collective bargaining negotiations.

Part of the growth of contract companies comes from the growing phenomenon of long distance commuter mining as many miners are hired by contract companies as commuters, as in the case of Shabandowan. The industry has decided to avoid setting up permanent mining communities as evidenced by the conclusions of the Whitehorse Mining Initiative, relying instead on workers to regularly fly-in fly-out (or drive-in, drive-out), leaving their families behind. The Whitehorse documents note that the increased use of long-distance commuting employment is due to ‘the challenges posed by single-industry communities’

as ‘many communities have a difficult time accepting the end of the economic life of the local mine’. It noted in 1994 that 150 Canadian communities are partly or totally dependent on mining and recommend that provincial and territorial policies encourage no new building of single-industry communities unless they can demonstrate long-term economic and social benefits.<sup>9</sup>

This position remains largely unchallenged and, predictably there have been few if any new mining communities created since, yet few public or private measures exist to allow workers and their families to deal with the difficulties created by this new work arrangement. The work schedules are generally long: in Shabandowan for example, workers do 30 days without a day off and many work extended shifts, resulting in fatigue and isolation.

For many this schedule also creates additional family pressure due to extended separations. This in addition to deteriorating conditions of employment found among those working for contract companies including frequent changes of job sites as well as working without job security, pension funds or seniority protection.

Study participants are involved in a few different types of commuter mining. The most prevalent is work in fly-in, fly-out mines, working on a contract basis such as Shabandowan, a 13 hour drive from Elliot Lake in which workers do 30 days in, 14 days out; several others are at Detour Lake, a 7 hour drive from Elliot Lake in which workers do a much more popular 7 days in, 7 days out. Many are engaged in another less disruptive form of commuting as they work in Sudbury and return home either daily (a return commute of 320km), often as part of a car pool, or weekly, staying with friends or relatives in Sudbury during their work days. This is popular not only because of the ease of the commute but because they have been hired directly by Inco or Falconbridge and not a contract company. Another com-



muting arrangement, though far less common, is international commuting.

A few of our participants are finding employment overseas as Canadian mines increase their foreign investment and overseas activities. It means leaving the family in Elliot Lake and coming back approximately twice a year.<sup>10</sup> This growing instability in mining employment will result in significant and perhaps permanent dislocation for those laid off from Elliot Lake. They will have to put up with either frequent moves, commuting or unstable employment and these will make adjustment difficult even for those who are re-employed.

Many of our participants came to Elliot Lake or entered mining at Elliot Lake with the promise that they would be there until they retired, and many have a strong attachment to the region. This will be compounded by the cost of such dislocation both in terms of living expenses and the emotional cost to family members caused either by frequent moves or by commuting. This level of dislocation is made worse by the fact that they returned to the job market at an older age and are thus having to fight to find a good stable job in mining which usually takes some time, and they will do it like so many do, that is to reenter the job market through the back door of the contract companies. Even if they do so fairly rapidly it will nonetheless mean an overall fall in revenue as they will have to build up their seniority once again. Until they do, they do not work in the best areas underground so do not make the best bonus and when a lay-off occurs, they will be the first ones to go, thus increasing their chances of having to go through another costly and difficult dislocation.

Two other issues became important in understanding the current re-employment patterns, these are the issues of health and age both of which make it more difficult for an important number of our study participants to find new jobs in mining. Problems with health and injury are prevalent in mining and our study surveys found 44.5 per cent

of survey participants reporting work-related injuries.

Because this figure does not indicate a measure of intensity, many of those reporting work-related injury or health problems were nonetheless successful in finding new work. Yet there are a more vulnerable group of workers who because of work-related health or injury were having greater difficulty in adjusting.<sup>11</sup> We thus identified a group within the survey we considered more vulnerable within the adjustment process as finding a new job in mining was not an option because of the added problems of health and age issues. For them the inability of returning to mining employment combined with low levels of formal education, the remoteness of Elliot Lake with its weak educational resources and the lack of alternative sources of employment made their situation even more difficult. This emerges clearly in the focus groups analysed below.

#### **The first priority: looking for work**

The focus groups analysed in this paper were undertaken in April and May 1996 with still-employed Stanleigh workers and their spouses who were facing impending closure in June.

In all, five focus groups were held. Three with spouses of Stanleigh workers, all women and two with Stanleigh workers, all men. The spousal focus groups were divided into one group of women who worked outside the home, one group of women who did not, and a third combined group. The men's groups included mostly underground miners. There was only one couple among the two groups. All groups targeted people who were not eligible for pension or early retirement, thus invitations were only extended to those under 50 years old, leaving us with a relatively narrow age range of between 36-49 years for the men, and 29-51 years for the women.

Given this narrow age range, we expected that their first choice would be to find new employment, with other deci-

sions revolving around this principle one. We were right. With very rare exceptions the women's first concern was for their spouse to find a new job though a very few did see it as a chance to move in new directions. One woman saw it as a chance to relocate into an area where she would have more liberty to pursue her own interests; another saw it as a chance to return to school while her husband took over the main child-rearing responsibilities. For the men, the only non-job related choice was for further education and training. This was chosen only if the return to mining was not possible because of health or age or if the education was of short duration, leading quickly to new employment possibilities.

By far the most popular option expressed by all participants in the groups would be a return to some form of the status-quo: to continue working and living in Elliot Lake with the same level of income. This attests to their attachment to the region and their community. We were told at various times in the study that for the most part people wanted to stay in Elliot Lake.<sup>12</sup> Older people, both men and women feel they were the pioneers who had built the town by contributing both time and money. Most had now bought their homes from the mining companies and had made improvements to them, in fact the family home, and the investment that it represented, was one of the main deciding factors and we saw both in the focus groups and other parts of the study that the extent to which the house had been paid was a big factor in the decision to stay or to leave. It was second in importance only to the question of re-employment, but essentially the two decisions were closely linked.

For many, having paid off the house makes the commuting option a more useful one as they can maintain their current home and keep their cost of living down as Elliot Lake has a relatively low cost of living. It then becomes feasible to manage on reduced revenues, giving people greater flexibility in their choices. This is especially true if the family has one



maining income, or the chance of finding some form of employment in Elliot Lake, especially among those with more diversified skills. Once the house paid for, participants were often unwilling to embark on a bigger mortgage, even in Sudbury especially since their houses would lose value in the relatively weak Elliot Lake housing market and houses were far more expensive in Sudbury.

Many of those laid off in the earlier lay-offs had managed to sell their houses back to the company often at a loss but this was not an option during the last closure. It thus became more economic to continue living in their Elliot Lake homes. Moving to Southern Ontario where housing prices are much higher is not considered a serious option. Discussions around relocation revealed the depth of their loss resulting from the closures as it revealed their concerns over moving the children, leaving elderly parents or other members of the extended family as well as leaving the community. Yet the absence of employment opportunities in Elliot Lake, especially at comparative wage levels made it necessary to consider these and this opened the discussion to what they considered were their real choices.

The women's groups saw their first choice as a new job for their husband. Beyond that common point, there was a noticeable difference between the women who worked outside the home and those who did not. Broadly stated, those who work outside the home feel they have more choices because there will still be one salary after June, yet they have less flexibility than single-income families as their solutions are more complicated. For most, the chosen option was invariably to continue living in Elliot Lake for a time while their husbands undertook a variety of job search options: if at an age where they could find a mining job, then the best choice was commuter mining. For some, their husband's strategy was to diversify their skills to find a different job in Elliot Lake or to start their own business. This was true for two

participants whose husbands would not likely find work in mining because of their age.

Work outside the home for women in Elliot Lake and for our women participants was mostly in the public and private service sectors, given the limited job opportunities available in the town. The most prevalent work is in the public sector as teachers, nurses and government employees. The important issue for them is not only the income their job provides but its job security and benefits. They wanted to hold onto their jobs because several had seniority and thus job security which they would lose if they moved. For example, even when teachers move between school boards they lose their seniority. This was particularly important because their husbands were losing their security and benefits and it was considered essential for the family to have at least one job with benefits. One of the participants whose husband was choosing to diversify within Elliot Lake said to him: "You have benefits, and I have a job, not a high paying job, it's not enough to support us... but it's benefits". This concern over benefits was explained by one participant who noted she had begun cutting back on her medication in anticipation of losing her medical plan, resulting in increased health problems.

There was some worry however that their own jobs might not be secure for long because of the shrinking size of the town, the ageing of the population and government cutbacks especially in health, education and other services. This and the threat of a public sector strike at the time made all public sector workers uneasy. There was also the realisation that the town will shrink because of the loss of mining revenue, revenue which could not be replaced by the town's switch to retirement living in its strategy for municipal survival. This strategy had succeeded in retaining some of the value in the homes but created little secondary activity. In addition, the average age of the town's population will increase as the demographics will shift in favour of sen-

iors, resulting in a declining school enrollment, and threatening further jobs.

This was made very clear by the announcement of the closure of two schools in Elliot Lake around the time of focus groups.

For those who did not work outside the home, their main option was also for their husband's to find a new job. Little else was put forward as a second choice. The only choices they perceived were in the type of job and whether they stayed in Elliot Lake or not, again this depended on whether their houses had been paid or not. The only mention of their own return to work came from one participant who was already working part-time and who indicated she would try to extend her working hours and another who had only recently been laid off and was looking for work. We will see below that this was largely the result of their poor employment prospects in Elliot Lake rather than a conscious decision to stay out of the labour market.

The most limited choices were presented by those women facing the additional complications of health problems either for themselves or for their husband's, thus they formed part of this more vulnerable group for whom adjustment is particularly difficult. Part of the burden assumed by these women was caused by the additional role they played in supporting their husband through difficult times. All women noted supporting their husband as they felt the insecurity associated with undertaking a job search after so many years. They felt insecure about their skills as well as their fitness to find a new mining job. This was far worse for women whose husband's had more severe problems ranging from white hands, back problems and other injuries which prevented them from returning to underground work.

In one focus group, 3 out of the 5 participants reported their husbands had health problems. This was made worse by the reluctance of their husband's to file for workmen's compensation as it would be a mark against them, thus fur-



ther reducing their chances of finding a new job. The women talked about the concern that the men had over age, starting as low as 40 years as their husband's felt this would hinder their re-employment prospects.

One participant was faced with both her husband's and her own illness and she felt she had no choices. Her husband was in his early 40s, he had been an underground miner for many years and had been injured so could no longer work as a miner. His job prospects were now poor as he had kept his job at Stanleigh on light duty but would now find it impossible to find a new mining job. He was currently applying for workmen's compensation benefits which, if he won his claim, would allow him to return to school. They have decided to move to a bigger town as she was hoping to find work which she couldn't find in Elliot Lake. She is also looking for a full-time job with medical benefits as without it she has put off an operation. She had worked in the past as a store clerk, among other jobs, and was now only able to find low-paying temporary work in Elliot Lake. She noted that jobs were also disappearing for women in Elliot Lake. "Even if a woman wanted to take upon herself to provide for her family, she couldn't do it in this town". She felt her and her family were facing a no-win situation as the disruption to the family would be great if they moved, but living in Elliot Lake in poverty was not seen as a viable choice.

All women participants to the focus groups evaluated their own salaries as inadequate to compensate for the loss of their husband's salary. Well before this current lay-off, all had begun planning for the drop in income by reducing current expenses and their overall debt load. One participant said: "Yea, I've joked and said 'Okay I can pay the mortgage and the hydro and gas bill but we can't eat.'" Another said: "No and the kids can't grow because you can't buy them new clothes". Several participants were also worried that their husband's would

have great difficulty adjusting to the lower income. They also felt that a substantial drop in income would also affect their relationship with their extended family: they would no longer be able to help them and instead would have to ask them for help.

### **Men looking for work**

Elliot Lake was made up of two generations of mining families, resulting from the boom and bust cycle of Elliot Lake mining since the 1950s. The first generation are those hired in the 1950s who managed to stay during the downturn and layoffs in the 1960s. The second includes those hired as of the mid-1970s, especially between 1975-1980, during what can be called a second boom period of uranium mining.

Given the narrow age range of the men in the focus groups, between 36 and 47 years, all participants are among this second generation: most came to Elliot Lake from the North Shore or Sudbury as young workers, never having mined before thus prior to lay-off the Elliot Lake mines had been their first and only mining experience. Denison and Rio Algom had to attract them to Elliot Lake with generous packages, including access to new housing. A few are the sons of the first generation of miners. Thus many of the Stanleigh workers resembled those in our focus groups: they were underground production miners with between 18 and 21 years of mining experience.

These participants were thus skilled and experienced miners who concentrated their job search in mining as they knew that is where they would gain the best recognition for their skills and the highest pay. For the most part, they are all in their peak working years and see themselves as still having several work years left.

Several issues were of special concern to this group including pensions, commuter mining and their ability to find work given their age and health. We will see that their approaches are not that different from their spouses. They are less

open to other options than their spouses and more specifically focussed on finding a new job as quickly as possible.

While the men's groups were made up essentially of underground miners, the more varied jobs held by the husband's of those in the spousal groups revealed more varied options for those in different job categories, reflecting the differences in labour market between the job categories at the mine. It seemed that for those whose husband's are technicians or tradesmen such as environmental technician, ventilation officer or mechanic, they saw the possibility of finding alternate work in Elliot Lake because of their more diversified skills, and several were further diversifying their skills. These also seemed to be the people considering opening their own business.

The only woman whose husband had a staff job saw an even better option, for her the decision was clear, they were moving together to another mining community as he was a mining engineer.

It was important for him to remain in mining as that is where his skills are the most valued and, since like many others she did not want to split the family with a commuting arrangement but because he was staff, she felt more secure than the others that the conditions of his new employment would be more permanent than the hourly-paid workers or those working for contract companies.

Given their age and years of experience and what they knew about the industry, the men saw their career prior to lay-off as having about 12 more years with Rio Algom which would have made them eligible for a full pension. While the women were willing to consider choices not directly related to income (for a time), workers did not present this as an option. With the exception of two participants (out of a total of six) who had access to retraining funds, all indicated finding another job as their first choice but even those who were retraining saw this as a short term measure and aimed to return to work as quickly as possible. It was also important to find a job immedi-



reately so that they would not use up all their severance pay. This desire was also frequently heard during the spousal groups. Most participants to the overall study felt it was unfair that the severance package had to be used for all intents and purpose to extend unemployment insurance benefits rather than compensating them for the upheavals and losses they were having to incur because of the closures.

Those planning on returning to work immediately were only looking in mining, given their background as underground production miners.

This decision was poignantly articulated by one of the participants, a 43 year old miner who said: "All I know is mining. I was 18 years old (when I started mining), that's all I've done. So what am I supposed to do?... You can't quit because you've got your family to raise."

They also know that they have a lot of work experience and have benefited from significant job-related training – WHIMS, mine rescue, hazardous chemicals, first aid, CPR which should help them find work as: "Lets face it, if you were wanting to hire someone, you would want to hire somebody who, if you and he were in the stope in the middle of nowhere, and you want somebody who knows what to do to help out...It's an asset to the company." Yet with the exception of one participant who felt too unwell to work or go to school full-time, the consensus was that they would probably find work in mining: "I'll stick with what I know and I'll see if I can market my skills as what they are." They also knew they would be able to use their mining contacts to help find mining work, calling previous mine captains and shift-bosses.

Yet they are aware of the age and health problems they will likely face in finding a new mining job: "The majority of companies are looking for someone who is young and strong with a strong back, and we're not". One participant felt more optimistic as he felt mining companies were recognising that the older

worker was more stable, more dependable especially as the company would not have to invest in training. A more cynical reasoning was articulated however: "in the end, even older workers will find jobs as companies know that they won't have to pay a pension to the recently-hired older worker".

Yet their perception is that at their age, the better mining jobs such as the ones at the more centrally located and stable companies such as Inco and Falconbridge in Sudbury, are harder to get. The consensus in the group was that

"You haven't got much choice today". According to them, these companies use a battery of medical and aptitude tests as well as sophisticated screening techniques even before testing for skills thus their skills are devalued in relation to their age. They expect therefore only to get the poorer quality mining jobs where the conditions of work are tougher, the work situation is less stable and the mines are in more remote areas often hiring only commuter miners through contract companies. These are often the smaller mines where there is greater fluctuation in production and employment levels, and which often use less advanced production techniques, thus less productive and less well paying.

The hiring process in these mines is simpler than in the larger mines. As one participant indicated, the sum total of his medical consisted of: "You've got nice teeth, you're working tonight". Another mine in Northern Manitoba was recruiting people in Elliot Lake by phone. After looking at his resume, the personnel officer merely asked if he's in good shape, he said: "Ah, I feel pretty good". The employer responded: "So come on up". Another remote operation in the Northwest Territories even asked if the applicant had been to jail, saying that in fact it was better if he had: "because essentially you're living in a 6' by 8' room and you're in the middle of nowhere, so if you've been in jail before it would probably be to your advantage because that's basically how it is up here".

For many, these poorer quality jobs meant commuter mining, especially at first.

Participants in all three spousal groups recognized the instability in current mining employment based on their own experience and on that of the hundreds who had already been laid off from Elliot Lake – concluding that 'you can't count on it' (stability in mining). Because of the previous lay-offs in Elliot Lake during the past 6 years, they all know people who had moved to be closer to their new jobs but have had to move again because of new closures. Some had even come back to Elliot Lake.

This was true even for those considering moving to what was considered the more stable mining companies in Sudbury as they felt these would also become unstable. Inco and Falconbridge's mining operations had been there for several decades and the town had diversified its economic base, becoming a regional administrative and economic centre. Yet there was great fear that instability would also affect Sudbury and many were reticent to move the family to move there. The fear was that Inco's new Voisey's Bay venture in Newfoundland might do to Sudbury what the opening of the rich uranium mines in Saskatchewan had done to Elliot Lake.<sup>13</sup>

If this happened, they would be left with larger mortgages if and when lay-offs occurred and since they would be the last hired, they would also be the first laid-off.

A few people saw moving to Timmins as an option, though many said they did not want to move further north. Timmins seemed attractive as there are several active mines in the area which might offset the instability in a single mine as they probably would not all close at the same time. It also had the advantage of being closer to the mines to which workers would be commuting. One of the men said it would still be better to own a house in Timmins as he saw no future in Elliot Lake – "Even if you do your job for five years and decide to leave, you could



ways sell your house up there, but in Elliot Lake you're stuck" (referring to the weak housing market). He was the exception however among the men as the others saw continuing to live in Elliot Lake as a way of maintaining family stability in spite of the hardships of the commuting relationship on the family.

One of the important problems identified by the men with this growing instability was the impact this would have on their long term financial situation. Changing jobs this late in their work life would create problems because of the loss of seniority, the loss of the better bonus jobs, the loss of direct revenue associated with this work disruption but also reduced pension earnings even perhaps the loss of their pension. One participant explained: "I'll be short 8 months to reach 20 years as a Rio Algom employee (i.e. when he would have been eligible for a bridging pension.). I offered to buy it. No, they won't sell it to us, but they do it for staff". Instead they received a commuted pension which most intended to invest into self-administered pension plans (i.e. RRSPs or Mutual Funds) in hopes of increasing their retirement income. Focus group participants expected to receive about 25 000 Canadian dollars each for the commuted value of their pension, this after close or just under 20 years of employment. They would also have liked to do the same with their severance payments but felt they would most likely have to use it to live on.

In addition, once (or if) they find work at a new company, they will not be able to accumulate much in their pension fund and what is worse, contract companies rarely have pension funds.

A cynical, though interesting, aside around pension issues involved the length of time they felt they would need to collect a pension after retirement:

Participant One: "...by the time we retire, there will be nothing left anyway (i.e. in the government pension)".

Participant Two: "By the time you get it you'll be dead anyway. How many miners do you see living past 75... If you

claim 20 years on your pension, you're dead anyway."

This aside was revealing of the prevalent health problems in mining.

### **Education and training**

Many participants in the overall study took up education and training options after lay-off. This option was more popular after the earlier lay-offs as there was significantly more government support money available than there was after this last closure. For most returning to school was only made possible if they had full financial support while they went through the programmes. Many of those returning to school were thus also those on workmen's compensation who could not return to mining. By the time of the final closure, it was only those with access to workmen's compensation who were deciding to return to school, as most other education funding had ended.

When the decision was made to return to school, the desire expressed by the men was to take training that would allow them to return to the job market as quickly as possible. For many though the road was long and scary – many required several years of upgrading in order to finish their secondary education, even before undertaking any specialised training. Several noted a fear of going back to school, of opening books after being away for 25 years as they felt out of practice. One participant who had already begun his upgrading classes felt he couldn't get through it without his wife's help. In a separate series of focus groups organised around the issue of training, many commented that they found it hard studying because of their health problems as both the pain they lived with and the painkillers they took to ease it made it difficult to concentrate and study.<sup>14</sup> The women's view of returning to school was slightly different. Women in the Stanleigh groups agreed that they played an important role in helping their husbands decide their plan of action beyond the layoff. For women working outside the home, this included urging their hus-

bands to look at a wider variety of options, such as staying out of the job market for a time. One participant said to her husband "I wouldn't blame you if you wanted to take a year off. You do what you want to do, and we'll manage'. So I've tried to present him with every possible choice that he can look at." They made suggestions for different careers, doing some training or even opening a business. As one participant put it: "Well haven't we all sat down and asked them 'What do you want to be when you grow up? You know here's your chance to change careers.'"

For example one participant explained, "I find I'm more willing for different options than he is. He's really set in his ways saying 'well I'm going to get a job somewhere else'. First he didn't want to commute out of town because he would miss too much, but now he's considering it as it will allow us to keep our home...I would call him old fashioned, he's very set in what he thinks he can do. Whereas I want to tell him he can do anything he wants, if he just goes and tries it. He's never tried it so he's afraid to try something." This included for many encouraging their husbands to take more education. All lamented the scarcity of upgrading and retraining programmes accompanying this layoff, in part because they know that many workers, especially the miners, had not finished their secondary education. But even those with higher levels of education felt a need for further training in order to keep up with recent innovations in their husband's field.

The women were also interested in more education for themselves. Several were already taking correspondence programmes and were hoping, either when the children were older or if they moved to a place with greater access to higher education to go back to school themselves.

### **Search for stability**

The search for stability was important for both the men and women because of the impact on the family though the women were more categorical in emphasizing



The search for security and stability as the basis upon which they prioritize all their choices in terms of new employment. While the men were equally concerned about family well-being, they voiced strong concerns over their role in providing for the family, thus the emphasis for them on finding a new job quickly.

Because of their own jobs, women working outside the home were particularly unwilling to move, at least right away. One participant in the focus group summed it up for all: '...none of us are going to just give up our jobs, and move wherever our husband ends up... and I think all five of us will stay here until our husbands are established in something else at least.' They would only move if it was "worth our while", after taking into consideration what they would be leaving in Elliot Lake, especially the standard of living and their home. For another this would have to be a job that "lasts 10, 12, 15 years, to be worthwhile to move". At the same time though, they recognized that commuter mining was also a problem in itself, but also made worse by the fact that they also worked which would mean greater babysitting problems and family disruption. What they are willing to do is make the family move once they are sure their husband's new job is stable, recognizing that their own job provides some stability during the time it will take for the husband to find a stable job.

Those women who do not work outside the home were also concerned about instability. Even though they did not have to consider giving up their job, they did not want to move until they had some idea that the husband's job had become permanent or secure. Like the others, their concern was over family disruption, loss of community and increased housing prices. As one participant said: "I'm being insistent that he makes sure there are 20 or 30 years of reserves there. That this next move to this next mining company is secure, that you're there until retirement. Because I don't want to be another 10 years down the road, another ten years older and out looking". In spite of this

desire, the response to that remark from another participant was: "...have a job until when my husband retires, I don't think that will ever happen!... Even nickel at Inco is no longer secure". For all, this was in spite of the problems they knew they would face if their husband commuted.

In the discussions with the spousal groups, family stability and well-being emerged as being even more important than the need to find work. This consensus was articulated by one of the participants: "The principal choice is to keep the family together in a way where we can still pay our bills". And the same person who said living in poverty was not a viable choice, conceded that the most important thing is "stability for our families, even if you're on welfare, as long as you're together".

This was also articulated in relation to the commuting option: "...I don't feel that's the way I want to raise a family...I know Shabandowan is 28 in and 14 out and I've said to him 'I might as well be raising the family by myself', but I said it jokingly. And you would be! And I just know that's not the type of marriage I want.... So I'd rather see him take a ten dollar or an eight dollar an hour job here and have that family stability. So getting back to what is the most important issue, I don't think it is finances for me."

What they then considered to be the best option was for their husband to commute, at least for a time, until there is some indication that the new employment will be stable, then the spouses and families would eventually move. Their overwhelming preference was for a shorter commuting period of seven days in, seven days out, rather than the longer 28 days away. Ideally, they would like a situation where he would be away during the week and home on the weekends. The men also favoured the shorter commuting period.

For both men and women, there was an often repeated concern over marriage breakup resulting from commuting and the long periods apart. One participant

stated: "I would stay in Elliot Lake but you don't know, then the commuting bit, things fall apart". Another: "So how can we, even though we are all in very stable marriages, not worry to a certain extent about losing touch with the relationship". Another participant even blames the break up of her previous marriage on commuter mining as her previous husband, having been laid-off in one of the earlier Elliot Lake closures, began commuter mining and the relationship eventually fell apart. In her current marriage, she now refuses to see this as an option and if they leave Elliot Lake, they will do so together.

The men noted that commuting is hard on the family as a whole, but particularly hard when the children are young, and especially for their wives who will have to bring up the children alone, since they won't be there to help discipline the children. In terms of their role in the family they feared as one participant said: "...you don't count any more. The kids don't see you often enough." They recounted the anecdote that was heard frequently underground: "The father comes home from being away and the kids say 'I don't have to listen to you, you're not my father, my father was here last night'".

Men voiced concerns over their role as breadwinner and over family well-being, as they worried about the cost of food, clothing and education. One asked how they would manage as "the children had hollow legs" referring to the food bill. Though they joked about their relationship with their wives, there was concern about the stability of their relationships. One participant remarked that his wife played an important role in helping him get through his upgrading courses. The one participant who was separated felt that the closure has an impact on marriages, even though it may not be a direct cause. He said: "Well you're the single earner of the family and you see you have no budget that you're working with, you've got no future that you're working towards or things like that....What I was looking at was a future with nothing left



in it. Where am I going to go, what am I going to do? You know what I mean, so it was part of it, there were other factors as well...I don't think it (the upcoming closure) put the pressure on the family because it was far enough back at the time...But just all those things added in together."

Concerns over long term family stability centered around concern for the children and the extended family. Thus one group agreed that even if the nuclear family left Elliot Lake, or the husband commuted, they would keep their homes in Elliot Lake as the base, with the women often presenting their role as that of 'basekeeper'. This base would contribute to family stability by maintaining an anchor in Elliot Lake to which children can return once they have gone away to school, or as a place for ageing parents.

It is apparent that the change envisaged by the people in these focus group go well beyond the simple issue of finding a new job. We have seen profound concerns over a wide variety of issues, going as far as worry over the survival of their marital relationship and family stability. Interestingly though, many articulated a general sense that they will get through it.

In terms of overall tone, the women were somewhat more optimistic than the men, though both indicated their worries for their spouses, their children and for themselves. The most optimistic spousal participant indicated: "It's a stress and a worry, but I still feel things will work out, we'll make the adjustments as they come, and yet I don't always want to face this change." and "It might not be as high an income, it might not be as nice a lifestyle, but we'll make those adjustments. I think we're all happy right now!" There was consensus around this statement in her focus group.

### **Conclusion and policy issues**

Participants thus expressed quite clearly the set of problems they are dealing with now that they are faced with closure and the need to move on. Focus group discus-

sions reflected not only their own direct experience but that of their fellow workers and their families'. The focus group members were thus informed by the thousands that were laid off since 1990 and the confidence they expressed that they would manage this dislocation does not mask the fact that the change and disruption to their lives is profound. The emphasis on stability in the spousal groups and the description of the costs associated with job disruptions make this very clear.

People feel they will manage this time, but the financial loss associated with this dislocation as well as the depth of the dislocation, the energy, emotion and coping skills needed to make it through means they cannot manage it repeatedly. It cannot be undertaken frequently in a career. This is in sharp contrast with the growing instability of employment in mining.

This contrast indicates important areas of policy consideration that should be addressed by mining companies, different levels of government and by trade unions as the industry is moving to greater mobility and leaving the individual worker and family to cope with the impact of mobility and dislocation for the most part. Current measures do not address this issue of greater mobility required of workers, especially those living in remote communities. Policy measures should be designed to reduce the responsibility currently borne by individual workers and families in this increasingly unstable labour market.

More particularly this would mean dealing more adequately with the issue of mining housing, especially in the case of a mine closure and as a result of the industry's decision to undertake only fly-in, fly-out mining. Families cannot be expected to move from year to year or to live apart for long periods. It is thus important to create a policy that allows for industry flexibility as well as allow miners and families to have access to permanent housing. One of the possible solutions is to create permanent centers of commuter mining which would have im-

proved transportation facility and support services both for the family and for mining recruitment. Elliot Lake could easily become such a center.

The industry's search for greater mobility could also be eased with greater transferability of miners' skills, seniority and especially pension funds as well as the greater regulation of contract companies so that their working conditions comply with labour regulations. This would include normal work hours, compensation for the additional travel costs as well as the costs of room and board. Measures should be put in place to allow unions greater ease to organise mines run by contractors or where commuters make up the bulk of the workforce. Centres for long distance commuting miners could also become centres for union organising. Some of these policy areas are modelled on measures put into place in sectors with high levels of mobility such as parts of the forest industry in British Columbia and construction in Quebec.

Thus we have seen from our analysis of the focus groups that in spite of the massive nature of the disruption facing those laid off at Elliot Lake, workers and their families are resilient, bringing extensive coping skills to bear on a situation not of their choosing. The suggestion then is to put a few measures in place to facilitate the growing mobility of workers and families given the industry desire for greater flexibility. The intention is to assure that workers do not assume the costs of these disruptions alone as it is clear that they can cope with one move, but they cannot cope with frequent ones. Finally, we note that speaking to the women demonstrates the fuller cost of dislocations and especially the extent to which these go far beyond a simple monetary calculation which must be properly accounted for as the industry attempts to become more mobile and more flexible.

### **Notes**

1. These focus groups were undertaken as part of the qualitative work for the Elliot Lake Tracking and Adjustment Study, Institute of



Northern Ontario Research and Development, Laurentian University, Sudbury, Ontario. The project was funded by Human Resources Development Canada. Project leaders are D. Leadbeater, A-M Mawhiney, M. Neitzert, E. Porter, D. Robinson, D. Wilkinson, all based at Laurentian University.

The study is a longitudinal one that included just over 1000 former workers of Rio Algom and Denison Mines in Elliot Lake who have been participating in the study since 1990. Separate surveys were also undertaken in 1995 and 1996 with spouses of the worker group, approximately 500 women participated in each.

2. Total employment in the Elliot Lake Mines was recorded at 3 590 workers in 1989, but had fallen to 1 750 in 1990, and to 573 in 1992. Canada, Ministry of Natural Resources, *Canadian Minerals Yearbook*, Ottawa, various Years. This left approximately 500 to be laid off with the 1996 closure of Stanleigh. Please note that these figures should not be confused with the more precise layoff figures given by other members of the research team and should only be considered to be approximate.

3. The municipality of Elliot Lake had put together an alternate economic strategy aimed at attracting retirees from Southern Ontario based on access to good quality affordable housing, the former mining housing stock. This may have helped maintain municipal government revenues and even housing prices at a certain point in the closure process, but many miners noted losing equity in their homes either through the resale of their houses to the mining companies or through falling housing prices.

4. Government of Canada, Ministry of Natural Resources, *Canadian Minerals Yearbook 1994*, Ottawa, 1995.

5. The 1995 yearbook forecasted a rise in mining employment to just over 90 000 in Government of Canada, Ministry of Natural Resources, *Canadian Minerals Yearbook 1995*, Ottawa, 1996. Statistics Canada's Estimates of Employment in mining also demonstrated this upswing with estimates increasing from 113 000 in 1991 to 129 000 in 1995. Statistics Canada, Seasonally Adjusted Estimates of Employment Catalogue No. 72-002, June 1995.

HRDC's Job Futures records that unemployment among underground miners (Occupation Category 823) had increased dramati-

cally in 1992 to just under 16 per cent, and had fallen back to the 1990 level of just under 11 per cent by 1994. Human Resources Development Canada, *Job Futures*, Volume 1, Occupational Outlooks for Underground Miners, Oil and Gas Drillers and Related Workers, January 20th, 1997.

6. *Breaking New Ground: Human Resource Challenges and Opportunities in the Canadian Mining Industry*, Ottawa, Ministry of Supply and Services Canada, 1993, 107 pages, p. 8-9.

7. The average for each decade was calculated from monthly and yearly figures produced by the Ontario Natural Resources Safety Association. It was decided to do averages for the decades in order to get away, as much as possible, from the cyclical nature of hiring among contract companies which is even more acute than for other mining companies.

By contrast, the overall decline in mining employment is reported to have been about 35 per cent between 1981-1991. In *Breaking New Grounds*, op.cit., p. 9.

8. Brian Ferguson, Vice-President, Mining, Falconbridge, 'Human Resources in the Canadian Mining Industry: Challenges for the Future', *Human Resource Planning for the Mining Industry*, Kingston, Queen's University, Centre for Resource Studies, Proceedings No. 23, 1990, pp. 1-10, p. 5.

9. The Whitehorse Mining Initiative, *Workplace/Workforce/Community Issue Group, Final Report*, November 1994, p. 9 and p. 13.

10. Both Ferguson and *Breaking New Grounds* document an increase in mining exploration funds invested internationally. Ferguson, op.cit., p. 2. *Breaking New Grounds*, op.cit., p. 20.

11. Our study revealed that 22.2 per cent of all our participants felt that ill health affected the amount of work they can do on a daily basis, meaning that it had a major impact on their current level of activities. The number was higher – 31.3 per cent among experienced underground miners. This and other quantitative indicators of the problems of health and adjustment among the ELTAS survey participants is to be found in: S. Dansereau, Mining Industry-Specific Adjustment: Problems of Health and Age, ELTAS Report November 28th, 1997.

12. It is to be expected that the set of focus groups analysed in this paper and undertaken towards the end of the study perhaps reflect a

group who have stronger attachments to Elliot Lake as the groups may not have reflected the positions of those that had left Elliot Lake in the earlier days of the lay-offs many of which were younger workers with less seniority and thus perhaps less attached to the town, as well as single men for whom it was easier to move.

13. The lay-offs in Sudbury and especially among Inco workers in 1998 have been proven them right. Even though Inco is delaying opening Voisey's Bay, a large number of lay-offs have occurred in Inco's Sudbury mines largely because of the financial problems caused by a combination of lower nickel prices but also the company's financial over extension with the Voisey's Bay purchase. It is very telling of the industry that many of those laid off in Sudbury were in fact the Elliot miners who had been the most recently hired. They now find themselves unemployed yet again. Ironically several of them had even worked for Inco prior to going to Elliot Lake in the 1970s and 1980s. This back and forth is leaving them with little seniority and job security.

14. For a more in-depth discussion on issues of education and training, please see: D. Leadbeater, "Training, Mass Layoffs and Single-Industry Communities: Lessons of Elliot Lake". ELTAS, December, 1997. ■