

Editor's Note:

Last weekend at the Atlantic Region Canadian University Press [ARCUP] Conference in Antigonish, Nova Scotia; a motion was brought forth pertaining to the boycott against Molson's Brewery Limited; in support of their striking workers at the Molson's owned Vilas Furniture Company in Cowansville, Quebec.

The motion read as follows: "Be it moved that ARCUP support in principle the Quebec Federation of Labour in its stand against Vilas Furniture Company, owned by Molson's Brewery Limited."

Journal: Brunswickan [4:1:1]

We at THE BRUNSWICKAN sincerely hope that the students here at UNB and STU read the following article, which is reprinted from Montreal's McGill Daily, and urge that you support the boycott against Molson's and any of their subsidiaries.

By LEWIS GOTTHEIL  
for the  
McGill Daily

Three hundred sixty-four striking trade unionists are asking all Quebecers to boycott all Molson Brewery brands of beer: Molson Export, Canadian, Brador, and Laurentide. These workers are employed by Vilas Furniture, the largest furniture manufacturing operation in Quebec. Vilas Furniture is owned by Molson's Companies Limited.

Most of us at McGill associate the name "Molson" solely with beer. Today, the Molson empire encompasses diverse commercial concerns; in fact, less than half of total company revenue is derived from their brewery operations. One of these alternative sources of revenue is Vilas Furniture.

There are three Vilas plants in Quebec. One in Montreal, another in Thurso, and the third in Cowansville.

The Cowansville Vilas trade union is affiliated to the Confederation of National Trade Unions, and belongs to the Federation of Wood and Building Workers.

The Vilas furniture workers were the first to organize collectively in the Cowansville region. After a long battle in 1965-1966, they signed their first collective agreement. Today, they are ready to sign their fourth collective agreement if the administration at Vilas and at the Molson Companies head office in Toronto are willing to recognize the basic rights of the Cowansville Vilas worker to a safe and secure job at a reasonable wage.

BONUS SYSTEM

The union's last collective agreement expired on March 31, 1975. Now, entering

their seventh month of strike activity, the Vilas workers continue to seek three major changes for their new collective agreement.

Primarily, they want to abolish the bonus system of salary payment and replace it with a reasonable and secure hourly wage for all workers. Secondly, the union wishes to establish a clause which allows a worker to shut off his wood-cutting or milling machine the moment he believes that there is a serious technical fault in the functioning of his machine, and his own, or the work group's lives are endangered. The workers believe that, in such an instance, the machine should be immediately inspected and the worker reimbursed for lost working time. Thirdly, the trade union wishes to bar the company from arbitrarily transferring production from the Cowansville plant to any other Vilas plant, or independent sub-contractor.

The bonus pay system in effect before the strike as the mode of salary payment for production line workers is the major complaint of the union. The members will not go back to work until it is eliminated.

The system functions simply. A given worker is permitted a specified official time in which to complete his particular task on the production line. Those who execute their jobs rapidly, at a greater pace than the official time, earn a bonus in addition to their regular base salary. The workers feel that the time bonus system is an out-dated, dehumanizing, and murderous method of extracting the greatest amount of labour from the production chain worker.

It is murderous because the unbearable cadence of the production line increases the danger and risks that the worker must take in front of his woodcutting or milling machine, solely to complete his task within the constantly decreasing official time period allowance. There have been three deaths in the past ten years at Cowansville Vilas. In the woodcutting section of the plant, fifty per cent of all workers have lost a finger or a hand through amputation due to industrial accidents.

INDUSTRIAL MURDER

Industrial murder and assault is a crime that goes unpunished in Cowansville. In 1970, a man named Joseph St. Laurent was killed at work in the Vilas plant. The coroner-investigator of the Cowansville region concluded that the Vilas Furniture Company of Cowansville was criminally negligent in the death of St. Laurent. However, no charges were subsequently laid by the Ministry of Justice of Quebec against the furniture firm.

On the average at the Cowansville location there are six industrial accidents a month in which the victim requires medical care. Most injuries are related to the speed of the production line. Tired or older workers find it difficult to keep up with the younger ones who complete their job at a quicker pace. The loss of a finger or a hand is often the result of fatigue, loss of

concentration, or inability to keep up with the pace.

If everyone adequately adjusts to the official time rates and job specifications, the company often lowers the permitted job time or changes job specifications in order to avoid paying bonuses to all workers. The pay bonus is extremely hard to obtain when the company is forever changing its time rules and job outlines. Due to the problems inherent in adjusting to a new set of job duties and a new time allowance the workers find themselves enduring serious strain merely to match the time they are permitted for their given task. One of the workers at the Vilas plant with ten years of service has seen his salary drop from \$117 to \$100 per week because of these constant changes.

The bonus system has provoked dissension among the production line workers, and has led to unfair transfers along the line for older and senior workers. Conflicts developed because slower workers inevitably held back their neighbours on the line who had no choice but to follow the slower and subsequently lose their chance to gain a bonus sum of money.

That all the workers, young and old, capable and not so capable, have banded together to reject the bonus pay system is proof of their sense of justice and fair play, and their realization that people need to join together if they want to destroy a system that pits one person against the next.

MOLSON SPEAKS

The company refuses to change pay programs. An official claimed that this is how all furniture workers are paid in Quebec and that Cowansville Vilas is not about to be the first firm to do otherwise.

When questioned about the frequency of industrial accidents at Cowansville Vilas, the official stated that "the industrial safety record at the plant was no worse than any other furniture plant in Quebec."

In June 1975, a government safety inspector visited the plant and issued a report stating that 75 safety modifications in the production process were needed. None was made. By July 29, the 364 Vilas workers had left the plant to begin their strike.

The Toronto official corroborated the fact about the safety inspector and his report. However, the official stated that immediate application of the safety recommendations was not required by the law. The official said that it is not mandatory for the company to do exactly what the government says to achieve the recommended safety features. The company has the right to dispute the safety report and may enter into discussion with the provincial safety officials to arrive at a "fair and equitable solution". The official claims that this is normal procedure in industrial safety affairs. He concluded by stating that this is exactly what Cowansville Vilas was doing after the safety report was tabled.

NO COMPROMISE

Carol Jobin, an official negotiator for the union, responds to this pertinent question — "Can we ever be a compromise between the health and safety of 300 workers and the economic and political interests of the company?"

No safety modifications means guarding against the death of a worker.

Jobin continued by "unofficial negotiations and company demands to the abandonment of a safety plan."

Moreover, the government to follow inspection and verification of recommendations is often tempered by the major corporations, Company Limited, and the economic and political interests.

Evidently, the L prefers to retain the financial backers and rather than protect those who work in the

The above-mentioned figures are the real demands for the work own machine if he detects that threatens his safe

PRESENT

A corollary of the union the bonus pay system position. The trade union base salary (the present \$2.40 an hour) by subsequently add \$1.90 board to all production final figure would reduce wage for the individual permit him to enjoy a source of income—a right in any democratic society.

For those ninety employees the line, a similar hike pre-strike average wage.

Out of 364 employees hundred men from the other departments, work hour which in June 1975 the minimum wage.

The final major demand clause which would bar transferring production Cowansville plant to a or independent sub-contractor.

The threat of transferring historically been management persuade employees behaviour. Management the capability to use dissuade employees from legal rights according or their collective agreement by barring production is seeking to fulfil democratic right, the and secure income for union members.

According to Mr. negotiator, the Vilas maintained an intransigent not willing to compromise mutually compatible believes is possible. Jobin company is out to beat the company also wish demonstration effect victory in Cowansville workers in other Vilas the Cowansville region shifted unfinished production Cowansville plant to independent sub-contractor.

# Quebec furniture workers need support Boycott Molsons