

by Lewis Gottheil
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Molsons maims workers

Dal Photo / Douma



The Molson's boycott may keep this bottle off the table.

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 workers 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 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 outdated, dehumanizing, 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 bound 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 from the Toronto head office 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 compromises on safety

Carol Jobin, an official of the CNTU and the negotiator for the union in this conflict, responds to this position by asking a pertinent question—"When should there ever be a compromise concerning the health and safety of 364 men?"

No safety modification is too expensive if it means guarding against the loss of a limb or the death of a worker.

Jobin continued by claiming that the "unofficial negotiation between the government and company officials inevitably leads to the abandonment of the original safety plan."

Moreover, the willingness of the government to follow through with the inspection and verification of the implementation of recommended safety features is often tempered by the financial clout that major corporations, like the Molson Company Limited, carry in this province in the economic and political arenas.

Evidently, the Liberal government prefers to retain the support of major financial backers and remain in power, rather than protect the lives and health of those who work in the province of Quebec.

The above-mentioned appalling safety figures are the reason for the union demands for worker's right to halt his own machine if he detects a technical fault that

threatens his safety.

Present wages

A corollary of the union's stand to abolish the bonus pay system is its monetary position. The trade union wishes to boost the base salary (the pre-strike average was \$2.40 an hour) by forty per cent, and subsequently add \$1.95 an hour across the board to all production line employees. The final figure would represent the hourly wage for the individual employee and permit him to enjoy a secure and reliable source of income—a right that is inalienable in any democratic society.

For those ninety employees who work off the line, a similar hike is demanded. Their pre-strike average was \$2.83 an hour.

Out of 364 employees at Vilas, one hundred men from the production line and other departments, were making \$2.60 an hour which in June 1975 was equivalent to the minimum wage.

The final major demand of the union is a clause which would bar the company from transferring production orders from the Cowansville plant to another Vilas branch or independent sub-contractor.

The threat of transferring production has historically been management's weapon to persuade employees to alter their work behaviour. Management should not have the capability to use such a weapon to dissuade employees from exercising their legal rights according to the Labour Code, or their collective agreements. Moreover, by barring production transfers, the union is seeking to fulfill a fundamental democratic right, the right to a reasonable and secure income for all organized trade union members.

According to Mr. Jobin, the CNTU negotiator, the Vilas management has maintained an intransigent position. It is not willing to compromise and work out a mutually compatible accord, which Jobin believes is possible. Jobin believes that the company is out to break the union. The company also wishes to avoid the demonstration effect that a workers' victory in Cowansville Vilas might have for workers in other Vilas plants and the rest of the Cowansville region. The company has shifted unfinished production from the Cowansville plant to other branches and independent sub-contractors.

The strike begins

Negotiations for the fourth collective agreement began on Feb. 20, 1975. Accord was reached on a number of minor points. The question of the bonus pay system remained the major obstacle to a resolution of the impasse. The third collective agreement at Vilas expired March 31, 1975, and the right to strike was obtained on June 6, 1975. On July 29, the unionists struck the plant and production was interrupted. On Nov. 19, the company issued a comprehensive offer to the union. However, the bonus pay system was still included in the terms of their offer. On Nov. 25, a general assembly of the strikers rejected the