

Vilas Workers Continue To Struggle

Brewery Attempts

Response

The main line of argument pursued in the article which appeared in the student press was:

- that the Cowansville Vilas factory is unsafe and has a high rate of accidents and injuries;
- that these are due to the unnatural pace of work on the production line;
- That this pace is the result of the incentive pay system;
- that, however fast the worker's pace, the pay level is inadequate; and
- that the Cowansville Vilas management, and the Molson head office which directs their industrial relations strategy, has been intransigent in refusing to change the pay system to a basic hourly rate, as demanded by the workers and their union, the Federation of Wood and Building Workers (CNTU).

The Molson's rejoinder argues:

- that the safety record and pay levels at the Vilas plant are better than the average for other furniture plants in Quebec;
- that the "politically oriented" union leadership is unfairly demanding the abolition of the "incentive" pay system "despite the fact that the incentive system is characteristic of the furniture industry and 80 percent of all manufacturing plants in Quebec" including "all the manufacturing plants in Cowansville"; and
- that the article relied on factual information given by striking workers and union officials, which is at variance with factual information the Company offers to give its side of the story.

In short, the Molson's rejoinder shows that the industrial dispute at Vilas is characteristic of most bitter industrial disputes.

The union says the working conditions and pay levels are unsatisfactory; management replies that it is better than in other similar factories: the worker's counter by claiming the industry as a whole provides unsatisfactory working conditions and pay levels.

The union says they will not enter a new collective agreement until the fundamental pay system is changed; management refuses on the grounds that the incentive pay system is normal for the industry; the union counters by saying that despite (if not because of) the fact that the system is general, it must be changed.

And the "facts" are in dispute, with both union and management officials citing different figures, calculated in different ways, to support their differing positions, while claiming that the other side is "misleading" the public.

But, in the Vilas dispute, there is some room for independent judgement. The company position outlined by Molson's rest squarely on the favourable comparison it alleges between the pay and safety record of Vilas and the furniture industry in general.

If we accept that claim without question, and since the furniture has been used as a standard for comparison, it is possible to test the merits of the workers' claim that safety and pay are inadequate.

This can be done by comparing the performance of the furniture industry to that of industry in general, and to other manufacturing industries in particular in the key areas of pay levels and accident frequency.

Wage Claims Just

According to Statistics Canada figures, we find that last June, a month before the Vilas workers walked off the job, the average wage paid for a week's work in Canada was \$205.07, and in Quebec \$200.96. For durable manufacturing which includes the furniture industry, the average for Canada was \$224.94, and \$214.39 for Quebec.

As for the furniture industry, the average rate for Canada was \$168.04 per week, 82.7 percent of the general all-industries average, and only 74.6 percent of the average paid in other durable manufacturing industries. For Quebec, the average wage in the furniture industry was \$159.41, 79.3 percent of the industrial average and 74.4 percent of the average for durable manufacturing.

But stating the difference between what is paid in the furniture industry as a percent of what is paid elsewhere, as management in low-paying industries does, somewhat underestimates the differential. From the point of view of the worker, the difference between his low wage and higher rates prevailing elsewhere as a percentage of his present wage is more meaningful.

Using this method and the Statistics Canada figures, the average furniture worker in Quebec would have to receive a 35 percent increase in wages to come up to the average paid in the durable manufacturing sector as a whole in the province.

The Statistics Canada figures cited here include all salaries paid to all employees, from the president of a firm to a production line worker, and do not show the variations in what different employees receive.

By PETER O'MALLEY
Canadian University Press

Molson's Attack Story

OTTAWA (CUP) — The recent publication in the Canadian student press of an article supporting unionized workers in Quebec in their struggle against a subsidiary of Molson's Breweries, and calling for a boycott of all Molson products, has come under fire from the Breweries' head office in Toronto.

The article, title "The Molson Maimers and Their Victims", first appeared in the McGill Daily in Montreal and described the fight for fair wages and safe working conditions by the 364 employees of Vilas Furniture in Cowansville, 60 miles east of Montreal.

The Cowansville Vilas workers have been on legal strike against the company, the largest furniture manufacturer in Quebec and part of the Molson's furniture division, since last July.

The major issue in the dispute is the pay system, which provides a low base-rate with bonuses for workers who increase the pace of production beyond the specified basic level of output. Work under this "incentive" pay system is unbearable, the workers say, and leads to debilitating production line accidents.

But the Vilas firm remains intransigent in refusing to change the pay system, despite a seven-month strike and the workers' refusal to return to work unless adequate pay rates based on hours worked are implemented in the new collective agreement. The boycott of Molson products in Quebec was called to pressure the company into settling the dispute.

§ The article about the Vilas dispute and the boycott was picked up from the McGill Daily by the features service of Canadian University Press and soon began to appear in the 65-member national student newspaper network. Regional meetings of CUP papers in the Atlantic and

Quebec then endorsed the and several student newspapers the country have since they will no longer run advertising.

REACTION QUICK

Since news of the Vilas dispute the Molson's boycott had been confined to Quebec and no much attention elsewhere in the country, the Molson Company quick to react when the article appearing in the student press. Company Vice-President Affairs, G. Alex Jupp began student newspaper editors real and Toronto to put the side forward, and to correct the article as "the most one-sided piece of misrepresentation that has ever been seen in a newspaper."

Jupp claimed the Molson "has absolutely no desire to with the freedom of any publish what it wishes" Molson's, and the student been "victimized" by the affiliated union representing workers.

His approach shifted, however he spoke with members of national executive in Ottawa series of telephone conferences. Jupp repeatedly referred expressed by Molson lawyers article might be potential. He also made a pointed that CUP might be the target of a lawsuit. Jupp's request advise its member papers to yet run the article to re-doing so was rejected, but assured CUP would report Molson position when it available. He then prepared "rejoinder" which, he claimed, clarify the situation at Cowansville Vilas, and refute the boycott made in the earlier pro-

But they do clearly show that the furniture industry in Quebec, as in the rest of Canada, pays workers considerably less on average than what employees in general, and in the durable manufacturing sector in particular, receive for a week's work.

Industry Acc

Neither Statistics Canada have any comment on the frequency of the Canadian furniture Workman's Comp