

"There'll always be lots of land, lots of concrete and lots of strikes," said Poulin. "And we'll always build them that way. The problem is insoluble." He may be right. Because a project which creates anywhere up to 10,000 jobs like this one has an intrinsic shortcoming: it doesn't last for ever. And the workers wish it would.

Phase III of Idikki—this is Phase I they're on—calls for the construction of two small auxiliary dams and four miles of tunnel to increase the catchment of the reservoir. And there are other KSEB projects on the books, some of which will employ part of the Idikki labour force. "Otherwise," said a KSEB engineer, "they will not allow us to complete this work and leave the place."

The pathos of the worker who would like to postpone inauguration day indefinitely is grist for the unions, most of which are politically oriented and have powerful friends. There are about a score of them, ranging ideologically from the INTUC union to the far-Left Naxalites. Many are splinter groups. They are rivals for the workers' allegiance but they are united, every now and then, in championing the day labourer, whose morrow is a yawning unknown.

Useless to tell him that Idikki power will create many jobs in factories down in the plain. His concern is the next meal. That is why, when Hindustan Construction proposed to retrench 350 quarry workers in line with the progress of their operations, the unions could dig their heels in. At the instance of the State government, the contractor whittled the list down to 285, but the unions still wouldn't hear of it.

It was a test case. But of what? Whether the contractor could be obliged to retain his 4,800-strong work force in perpetuity, with or without work for them to do? The chances of employment at other projects had been hurt by the unions' own sons-of-the-soil policy. They had successfully opposed recruitment of labour from other parts of Kerala. The unions on other projects would be equally exclusive.

**T**HE quarry men would obviously have to go. The unions had pushed their case to the limit of credibility and would now have to retreat. If the contractor caved in on this one, how would he lay off the 1,000 scheduled to be cut in January when the work on the Idikki dam wound up? The government was preparing the ground for the inevitable. It had promised to draw up a seniority roll of daily paid labourers for rehiring when the occasion arose. Layoffs would be on a last-to-come-first-to-go basis. Monthly paid labour could expect to be retained.

It was probably the last big fight in Idikki's stormy labour history. The illogic of the situation had tied construction schedules up in knots. The workers, individually helpless, took shelter with unions whose labyrinthine operations were abetted by a legal anomaly: the contractor was bound by a labour settlement but not the union.

Not that the contractor was always blameless. One day work on the Kulamavu dam started an hour late because of rain. The contractor cut the workers' pay by 25%. Of course, there was a strike.

Those Canadians who've been around for a while follow these little dramas with sympathy and

despair. If there's a question that hangs over Idikki it is where do we go from here? And it applies as much to the Canadians and the KSEB engineers as to the labourers. "We don't know what will happen to ourselves," Poulin confided. "You work ten years on these projects and when you go back to headquarters you have to compete with a group of people who were your assistants before." There'll be no starvation, but there'll be resentment.

Or take the KSEB engineers. The Board has concentrated most of its graduate engineers at the project and promotions and retirements are a subject of absorbing interest. The KSEB officer knows he'll have to step aside at 55 but doesn't know what he'll do next. It may be a big comedown from Idikki.

The government, responsible to the tax-payer and the public at large, stands to lose millions of rupees in deferred power revenue, inflated costs and compensation payments to contractors whose own schedules have been thrown out. But it is under pressure from the unions to back their demands on the contractors. The labourers, in whose name all these activities arise, watch resignedly. "The great majority, are honest here," said Poulin, whose sympathies run deep with all the parties to this economic conundrum, but especially with the worker. "You shouldn't humiliate the poor guy by always forcing him to ask for something." But no one is in a position to be generous.

All these jostling interests, which might seem squalid in an urban setting, somehow assume heroic proportions against the physical backdrop of the Idikki project. Here is a hydra-headed system of streams about to be