

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 the 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.

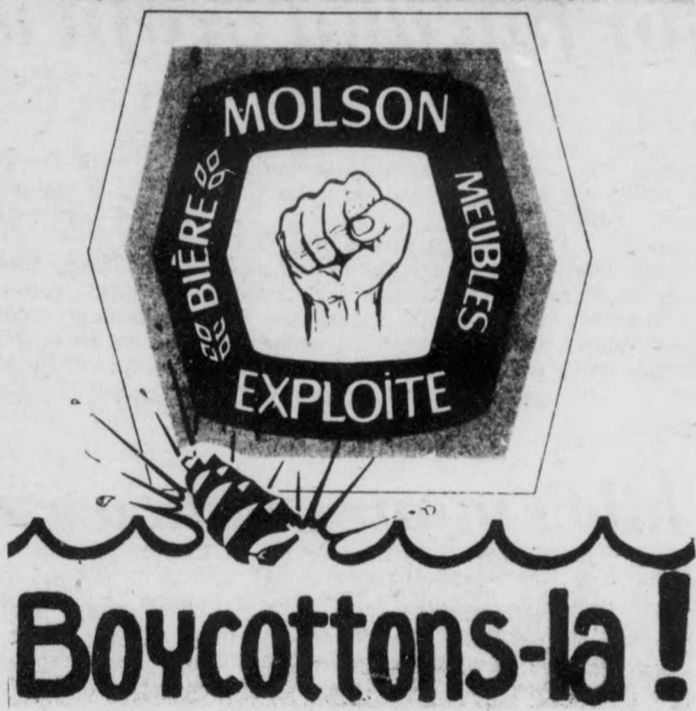
Out of 364 employees at Vilas, one hundred men from the production line and other departments, were making \$2.60 an hour which in June 1975 was equivalent to the minimum wage.

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.

Soutenons la lutte des travailleurs contre Vilas (Propriété de MOLSON)



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 to 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 company offer and reaffirmed their drive to abolish the bonus pay system.

After the Nov. 25 rejection of the company offer, the major and clergy of Cowansville in association with the Vilas management pressured the union to hold another vote. The clergy suspected that the first vote had been improperly managed. To rally their forces, and to prove to the clergy and major of Cowansville that their vote was a fair one and that this kind of political pressure was doomed to failure, the union held a second vote in which the clergy acted as scrutineers. The vote was a secret ballot affair. It took place in early February. The company's offers were again rejected.

This vote was a significant point in the short history of the Vilas strike. Throughout the Christmas holiday season, the company had used a journal of the Eastern Townships, "La Voix de L'Estrie", to publicize their case in full-page ads costing \$3000 each.

The ads aimed to generate dissension within the ranks and families of the strikers by emphasizing the generosity of the company offers and the cheerful spirit of the holiday season.

According to Mr. Jobin, the trade unionists have remained on strike and will continue to fight, not because they strongly feel that their demands are reasonable and justified. They are willing to return to work only for a reasonable hourly wage and their union security intact.

During the assembly of early January, the strikers demanded the services of a special mediator from the Ministry of Labour. On Jan. 25-26 the mediator, Roger Pilotte, met with company and union officials for 36 consecutive hours. Pilotte

issued a series of recommendations which the union immediately rejected. Jobin claims that Pilotte wrote his report without reading the full text of the union's position and offer.

At this time the parties again find themselves locked in a serious impasse. The company refuses to concede ground on any of the three major union demands, while the union refuses to concede on the issue of the abolition of the incentive time system.

The most recent chapter in the development of the Vilas strike was a major demonstration in Cowansville on the night of Monday, Feb. 9. Striking workers from Uniroyal, Heatex plastics company, Greb shoes, and Plessisville Hosiery plus trade unionists from the CNTU Central Councils of Sherbrooke and St. Hyacinthe, joined the strikers from Cowansville Vilas in a march through the streets of Cowansville and past the large Vilas plant which dominates the lower half of the town.

A rally was held in the St. Leon community hall of Cowansville immediately after the "manifestation". The speeches of Alderic Doucet, president of the Vilas trade union, Michel Bourdon, president of the "Federation des travailleurs de Batiments et Bois", and Michel Chartrand, president of the Montreal Central Council of the CNTU, reaffirmed the union's drive to obtain safe working conditions and a fair working wage. The assembly of 900 workers chanted "On n'en boit plus de Molson—la biere des boss". The noise, applause, and activity in the hall boosted the militancy and solidarity of all those present—all workers presently involved in labour conflicts. The successful rally was symbolic of the heightened awareness of the Vilas workers of the importance of their struggle and the need to persevere if they wish to emerge from what is already a very long and strenuous strike with their heads high and a decent collective agreement in their pockets.

The Vilas strike is naturally very important for all those participating in it or affected by its length and hardship. It is also extremely important for all other organized or non-organized workers in the Cowansville area. In the past, each collective agreement at Vilas has served as a measure by which most other companies in the Cowansville region calculate their own wage bill and rates. A victory for the Vilas strikers could well serve the entire Cowansville working class community, and give the trade union movement a much-needed boost to combat the intense attacks and opposition it encounters today, more than ever, at all levels of government and business circles.

The final outcome of the strike cannot be predicted. Even if one believes that the workers at Vilas have been treated unjustly, and that the union's demands are fair and right, it is important to realize that the concepts of justice and right have no part in the final, real resolution of the strike. In reality, industrial relations are power relations. Strikes are open battles in which either side, management or labour, defends and seeks to strengthen their own material interests and their freedom to act and control as many aspects of the work process as possible. If you believe, however, that it is a basic and inalienable right for a worker to demand and obtain at least a reasonable and secure salary along with safe working conditions, then there is no reason for you not to support the cause of the 364 furniture workers at Vilas.

The families of the workers at Vilas, and the workers themselves need your support, if they are going to win their battle. Show your support by publicizing and joining in the boycott of Molson Export, Laentide, Canadian, and Brador beers, all brands of the Molson Companies Limited.