

Job safety ignored

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It was not until 1974 that company officials admitted to the workers that asbestos could ruin their health. And this warning, which did not disclose the full dangers of asbestos, was posted only a week before Dr. Robert Morgan of the University of Toronto was sent to Baie Verte to study suspected health problems at the mines. "The Baie Verte work force can almost certainly expect, over the next 15 years, to produce a number of cases of asbestosis, an excess (over expected) number of cases of lung cancer, and perhaps a few cases of mesothelioma," he concluded. Morgan sharply criticized Advocate Mines management for their apparent lack of concern and pointed to the role of Dr. Douglas Black, medical superintendent, as a defender of health practices at Advocate Mines. This same Dr. Black, interviewed by a local newspaper during the recent three-month strike in Baie Verte over health conditions, stated "It's actually hard to see what they're striking about."

The more comprehensive and technical report provided by Dr. Selikoff last year formed the basis on which the miners made their demands for improved health conditions. Selikoff had determined that 31 per cent of those Advocate employees with 15 years or more work in the mines had chest abnormalities associated with asbestos. He also warned of the hazard to the remainder of the 3,000 residents of Baie Verte from asbestos dust carried home in workclothes and cars and from dust blown into the town

from the nearby tailings pile. This tailings pile is a mountain which hovers over the natural hilly countryside surrounding the town of Baie Verte. Selikoff recorded exceptionally high levels of asbestos dust in buildings and outdoor areas in and around Baie Verte. On the road to nearby Fleur de Lys, which is used to transport school children to and from classes, the level was 14,000 nanograms per cubic metre, believed to be the highest ever recorded in an area outside of an asbestos operation.

When last year's contract expired, the union demanded that health conditions be given priority in negotiations. They demanded that Advocate construct a "dry" which would enable miners to shower and change their clothes before going home to their families, a car wash to allow the workers to rid their cars of asbestos dust before entering the community, basic washroom facilities to assure that miners could wash their hands before eating lunch at the mine and dust-free lunchrooms.

The union demanded the right to monitor dust levels and post the results, and the right to temporarily close down any area where machine breakdowns resulted in higher dust levels. The tailings pile had to be better controlled, they insisted.

Advocate, controlled by the giant Johns-Manville Company, promised to clean up but would not put their intentions in writing. Based on past experience, the miners decided to force the issue by going on strike. On February 13, the 510 men

walked off their jobs to begin a lengthy fight for health improvements.

Having made little progress after one month on strike, the union decided that residents of other parts of the province had to be made aware of the situation. Using "Harlan County U.S.A.," a hard-hitting film centering on health problems in the coal mining industry, local president Saunders and vice-president Gerald Dwyer toured six communities in Newfoundland and Labrador to show the film and talk about Baie Verte. The resulting public knowledge led to the involvement of many sectors of the population. The St. John's Oxfam Committee had been involved in the film tour and planned further action in terms of publicizing the plight

of the miners; the Newfoundland New Democratic Party held successful fund-raising drives; the Human Rights Association of Newfoundland and Labrador came out in vocal support.

One of the most important activities involved the women of Baie Verte, who after seeing how great a role women played in the Harlan County strike, organized with the assistance of the Women's Institute, a locally based organization which has membership in many rural communities.

After three weeks, the women in Baie Verte launched a mass demonstration through the town. More than 500 people from the Baie Verte Peninsula marched through the town, following a coffin which symbolized their concern over



Workers loading sacks of asbestos, and everyone for miles around the plant are endangered by the asbestos fibres that freely float through the air and settle on everything around the plant.

Johns-Manville: Keeping us warm?

In many ways, Newfoundland is a developing country. Its economy is based on the export of natural resources, most of them in an unfinished state. Unemployment in Newfoundland is the highest in the country—19.4 per cent officially in March, 1978. But Statistics Canada underestimates the unemployment rate, critics say; the People's Commission on Unemployment, for example, puts the rate closer to 34 per cent.

Newfoundland is also heavily in debt and its government is encouraging foreign investment.

However, in terms of asbestos mining, Newfoundland does have an advantage at present in that it belongs to a relatively developed country which produces 40 per cent of the world's asbestos. Quebec workers have already made two attempts to better their working conditions and, with the success of the Baie Verte workers, will likely fight this battle again.

Advocate Mines itself is quite a lucrative operation. Since opening in 1963, the company has mined more than \$1.7 billion worth of asbestos and, with asbestos price increases, the annual value of production has tripled in the past 10 years. Reserves were estimated at the end of 1976 at 48.7 million tons, about one-third of the reserves at Canada's huge Thetford Mines in Quebec.

In the 1970-1976 period, net income for Advocate after operating expenses, interest, depreciation, amortization, exploration costs, taxes and extraordinary items totalled \$11.9 million. The report of the Financial Post Corporation Service in March, 1978, stated "the company noted that medium and long term prospects remain good."

However, the jobs of the Baie Verte workers are not secure. While Mexico is the only undeveloped country in which Johns-Manville operates mines at present, according to a company official who is quoted in the magazine "The Elements", the company is looking "from the Sudan to South America and on to the Far East" in search of new asbestos deposits. Johns-Manville has already signed an agreement with the Gulf International Group of Kuwait

and the government of Sudan to develop Sudanese deposits, the article states.

Johns-Manville is not the only multinational involved in Baie Verte. While it holds controlling interest (30.6 per cent), other major shareholders include Compagnie Financiere Eternit, a Belgian-based company which operates mines in South Africa, Colombia and Brazil, and Amet Corporation Inc., registered in Panama. Advocate Mines has one local director, according to the Financial Post Corporation Service report of June, 1977, and he is Andrew Crosbie of St. John's, one of Newfoundland's most wealthy businessmen, (brother to PC MP John Crosbie).

The mobility of multinationals is a well-known part of Newfoundland's history. The Aluminum Company of Canada (ALCAN) closed down Canada's only fluorspar mine last year, throwing close to 400 people in the Newfoundland town of St. Lawrence out of work. The workers had in recent years won concessions in the area of health and safety—previously, 117 had died from cancer as a result of the presence of radon in the mines—but ALCAN decided it was cheaper to buy fluorspar on the world market and closed down the St. Lawrence operation. Mexico is one of the countries from which ALCAN has imported fluorspar.

But as the union in Baie Verte demonstrated by their lengthy strike, Newfoundlanders are no longer willing to sacrifice their lives for the sake of a few jobs.

The strike by the Baie Verte asbestos miners is not the first time that workers have battled the asbestos industry over health conditions.

In Scarborough, Ontario, 34 former Johns-Manville employees have died and another 60 have been disabled by asbestos-related diseases. The workers endured a lengthy strike in 1975 to win concessions in the area of health and safety. They also succeeded in pressuring the Ontario government to impose a two fibre/cc limit on asbestos dust.

In Quebec, where 80 per cent of Canada's asbestos is produced, miners closed down the operations at Asbestos Corporation, Lake Asbestos of Quebec, National Asbestos, Bell



We'll keep a lot of people warm this winter.

Johns-Manville is a leader in the development of energy saving products. Our new Super Insulation is a revolutionary new product that provides superior insulation for homes and buildings. It's made from recycled newsprint and is easy to install. It's the perfect solution for keeping your home warm and comfortable all winter long. Johns-Manville is committed to providing high-quality products that improve the lives of our customers.

While Johns-Manville's advertisements claimed that they were "urging the government authorities to set tougher insulation standards for new homes . . .", they continued to ignore government safety standards and threatened to pull out of Newfoundland and move to countries where they would find no talk of government health standards.

Asbestos Mines and Carey-Canadian Mines for seven months in an attempt to win health provisions. However, the workers were forced to make a hasty wage settlement when Ottawa announced it was imposing wage controls in the fall of 1975.

In the United States, Johns-Manville led the battle against government legislation in 1972 to lower the legal exposure of asbestos dust in the industry to two fibres/cc. The company threatened that the legislation would result in

the export of Americans to the developing countries. As a Johns-Manville vice-president stated, "Attempting to have a standard of two fibres per cc will cost the American industry millions of dollars in increased operational costs and unfortunately cause significant number of jobs to be shifted to foreign workers . . . we would simply be shifting problems to other workers in the worksite because of unrealistic and unnecessary regulations."

The same company is arguing against the 0.1 fibre/cc limit that has been recommended by the National Institute Occupational Safety and Health on the ground that two fibres/cc will have "no adverse effect on morbidity or mortality." Company officials contend that no new medical evidence has arisen since 1972 to prove the need for the lower standard.

Johns-Manville's threat the shift of jobs to less developed countries which have less stringent health standards is not without a basis. An official of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration stated, "The multinational implications of adhering to U.S. standards has in some cases already had the consequence of removing dirty operations to Latin America and keeping the cleaner part of the production process here." A United Nations study also warned that "and might be set in motion to export pollution developed to the developing countries."

Why do these less developed countries accept and even encourage industries that pose hazards to the health of their people?

The North American Congress on Latin America, in its publication "Dying for Work," explains that in a country such as Mexico, where some asbestos operations have relocated, combined unemployment and unemployment rates are in the 60 per cent vicinity. Secondly, disease in Latin American countries is so widespread that occupational health and safety are often overlooked—nutrition and infectious diseases account most deaths—and there is also a shortage of professional and technical people who are the training to recognize occupational health problems, the report states.

asbestos-related deaths. Local businesses shut their doors in support of the protest.

The march attracted national as well as local media attention and was responsible for bringing financial support for the union from out of the province.

The focus of both the union and the women was not only on the company but on the provincial government for its lack of action in the dispute and in the protection of the Baie Verte people.

Throughout the film tour, Saunders and Dwyer asked people to send letters to Mines Minister Brian Peckford to pressure government to enact a two fibre/cc dust limit at the mine site. Such a limit is already in effect in Great Britain, the United States and Ontario, but Newfoundland has only a recommended limit of five fibres/cc, a level which most experts agree is too high.

In fact, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health in the United States is now recommending a 0.1 fibre/cc limit in U.S. asbestos plants. Dr. Joseph Wagner of that institute has stated "Rather than misleading the public, we have to assume no safe level (for asbestos dust) exists. We have yet to see data which could stand up to scientific scrutiny of what a safe level is."

But Peckford insists that the average 2.5 fibre/cc of the Advocate mines in Baie Verte is "adequate." The miners respond that it is not the average they are concerned with; last year, there were monitorings showing levels as high as 19 fibres/cc in some parts of the operation.

Peckford's statement is consistent, however, with his stance on occupational health and safety in the mining industry. Last year in Quebec, the minister stated that Newfoundland must be careful not to legislate itself out of jobs.

Government has, however, introduced legislation which will take occupational health and safety in mining out of the hands of the mines department. The proposed legislation, which is scheduled to apply to the province's mines next year, enables workers to refuse to work in an area which they consider dangerous. Jurisdiction over this matter will lie within the department of manpower and industrial relations.

The major criticism of the act as it applies to Baie Verte is that it encompasses no dust limit for asbestos. And the question of who finally determines whether a workplace is unsafe, remains unanswered.

The union is still working to have the two-fibre limit included in the legislation and is negotiating an interim agreement to this effect with the mines department. The company, in late May, conceded to most of the union's demands in the area of health and safety and the workers returned to their jobs May 22.

Provisions of the two-year agreement included the following: creation of a five-man utility crew to monitor dust leakage from equipment and correct leaks at least on a temporary basis until full maintenance can be carried out; regular monitoring of dust, gas and noise levels by union members, with results posted monthly; a main dry with showers and changing rooms to be built by July, 1979; mobile lunchrooms equipped to minimize dust exposure to miners; car wash, construction of which is to begin two months after company and union have agreed to the design; provision of pressurized, air conditioned cabs for tractor operators; and installation of a sprinkler system to control dust at tailings dump.

Monetary provisions afford the workers a 37-cent raise in the first year and a 60-cent hike in the second year. This will bring wage rates to levels between \$5.73 and \$8.99 an hour, depending on classification.

But the fight is not over. The concessions won by workers forfeiting three months wages are only the basics in assuring some protection against the deadly asbestos dust. Historically dust limits for the mineral have been lowered in stages as what were considered "safe" levels prove to do little to prevent asbestosis and other asbestos-related diseases. With the United States pressuring for a 0.1 fibre/cc limit, the Baie Verte workers are still aiming to achieve a two fibre/cc limit. And there has been no provision yet to level off the tailings pile from which asbestos dust blows into the town.



Asbestos workers protest health hazards at Johns-Manville plant in Long Beach, California 1976.

Health hazard

Doctors choose sides

A threat to the health of a specific sector of the population such as that posed by asbestos is an obvious concern for the medical profession. Yet experiences in Quebec, the United States and now Baie Verte indicate that certain doctors put the economic well-being of the corporation ahead of the physical health of the workers.

In the United States, for instance, a California asbestos worker successfully sued the company doctor for Johns-Manville for malpractice. Dr. Kent Wise, the doctor in question, is in turn suing the company on the basis that he had informed company officials upon his hiring of his lack of expertise in asbestos-related diseases and the company had told him "not to worry about it."

Company clinic personnel in Quebec have been proven to have given false information to workers about impairments caused by asbestos. As Robert Lessard, a former Thetford Mines worker, told the Globe and Mail, "I got an x-ray from a doctor in the first week of September. He gave me a class A (good health). A week later I went for an x-ray in Montreal at the Workmen's Compensation Board's industrial clinic and I was told I had asbestosis."

Dr. Paul Cartier, who served at the company clinic near Thetford Mines from 1940 to 1974, has openly admitted that he lied to the workers. "I figured it was in their best interests to stay at their jobs. Besides, they didn't want to be reported ill and transferred to lower paying jobs where they might have earned as much as \$50 less a week . . . even if they had left their work completely and gone on to drive cabs, for instance, it might not have arrested the progressive effects of asbestosis."

But Lessard, now disabled, is unimpressed. "In all sincerity, is it right to let a man continue to work in asbestos if he's sick because the doctor is concerned about the man's family?" he queried. "Me, I think not. A doctor takes a Hippocratic Oath when he begins practice, not a hypocritical oath."

The different biases of medical groups show up in results of their studies. A McGill University study which is quoted often by company officials was financed by the industry. Its researchers discovered abnormalities in 18 per cent of Thetford workers. In comparison, Dr. Irving Selikoff and his Mount Sinai team from New York found abnormalities in 60 per cent.

Following criticisms of a union bias, Selikoff had his x-rays read by specialist Eugene Pendergrass of the University of Pennsylvania. Pendergrass did not know where the x-rays originated and yet he found abnormalities associated with asbestos in a higher percentage of workers than did Selikoff.

Mt. Sinai has offered to submit its x-rays along with those from McGill to an independent team in Great Britain but so far there have been no takers for the proposal.

Judge Rene Beaudry, who headed an inquiry into the Quebec asbestos industry, criticized companies for tending to "medicalize the problem of air quality" and noted that their approach was based on "medical compensation rather than the protection of the workers' health." Company doctors, he stated, contested asbestosis claims granted by the Workmen's Compensation Board while "all the necessary data exists to initiate the technological control of asbestos dust."

In Baie Verte, medical superintendent of the government-operated hospital Dr. Douglas Black was quoted in a 1974 report by Dr. Robert Morgan as stating that Advocate Mines is "a model operation, about as clean as you can get." He considers the health hazards to be distorted and magnified by irresponsible media persons, reported Morgan.

Workers in Baie Verte complained that the annual medical examinations performed at the hospital were "limited" to the point of being inadequate, Morgan continued. He pointed to two men he examined who had lung function tests recorded but repeatedly and vigorously denied previous testing. "The machine used is not that recommended by the provincial health officials who have offered funds to replace it."

Morgan also noted that "Dr. Black admits he is in the unfortunate position of having acted, over the years, as a defender of health practices at Advocate Mines."

When criticized by union officials for having a company bias, Black responded by refusing to conduct the government-funded miners' medicals. However, negotiations between Black, the union and government officials resulted in at least a temporary resumption of the examinations.

The Newfoundland Medical Association, which represents doctors throughout the province, has been predictably silent on the whole health issue related to asbestos and on the Baie Verte situation. Likewise, the Canadian Cancer Society's provincial branch has not commented publicly on the high exposure levels in Baie Verte to this well-known carcinogen.