

Out of the Dust

Quebec's famed "fiber belt," which produces about 85% of the world's asbestos was shut down tight last week by a strike.

Negotiations between the National Federation of Mining Industry Employees and the U.S. owned Canadian Johns-Manville Co. had dragged on for two months. Last week the Federation decided to skip arbitration, called an illegal strike. The strike closed down pits in Asbestos, Thetford Mines, Black Lake, Coleraine, St. Remi and East Broughton.

The union wanted a fifteen cents an hour wage hike, a check off under the justice Rand formula, which collects dues from non-member as well as members, and better protection against asbestos dust. Asbestos dust control, said Montreal's influential *Le Devoir* was the most important issue. *Le Devoir* had published a 25,000 word survey of working conditions in asbestos mines, which called them "a charnel house almost beyond compare." For proof, it had cited case histories of deaths due to asbestosis (a disease brought on by asbestos fiber filling and badly scarring the lungs).

Johns-Manville, spokesman for all the asbestos companies, dubbed the talk of dust "a diversion designed to bid for public sympathy and to conceal the real aim, which is to tie up the entire asbestos industry in Canada with industry wide bargaining." It cited the one million dollars it had spent for "a dust precipitation system, air suction fans and air filters." It offered to renew arbitration negotiations if the men returned to work.

At first, the asbestos strikers heeded the plea of their parish priest, and "moral counsellor," Abbe Louis-Philippe Camirand, to keep the strike peaceful. But after five days, a handful of strikers moved into the company offices, and took possession. The company promptly went to court, got an injunction to stop picketing, and prepared to sue the union's parent body, the Canadian and Catholic Confederation of Labour, for five hundred thousand dollars for "damages and loss of production." At week's end Premier Maurice Duplessis hustled eighty provincial police into Asbestos.