

Settlement Is Imperative In Asbestos

It is all but inevitable that prolonged deadlock in an industrial dispute leads to violence. It is also a matter of record that an outburst of rioting is often followed by a reaction which leads eventually to a settlement. The wild events in Asbestos yesterday, events which cannot in any circumstances be condoned, may thus lead to peace, but rioting is not the proper prelude to settlement. Its only significance lies in the bankruptcy of human resources to negotiate.

Responsibility for this apparent bankruptcy in the Asbestos strike must be widespread. It is notorious that difficulties are encountered in ascertaining even the facts in industrial disputes. Statements are issued piecemeal, each one dealing with some different aspect of the dispute. Each one may be accurate enough, but it becomes less and less easy, as a strike continues, to find out just what the absolutely essential differences are between the parties to the dispute.

In the asbestos strike one fact stands out. The Government has not played the mediating role it might have assumed. For this the initial responsibility rests on the asbestos workers' union. Nobody has ever denied that the strike, under the terms of the Quebec Labour Law, was illegal. The government took up its position on that ground and stood pat. It refused to take any action whatsoever until the strikers had put themselves, as it were, within the law.

The human factors that develop during a dispute are, however, not often amenable to such narrow legalism. The strikers, instead of yielding to this government demand, maintained their strike with a very good measure of effectiveness. The companies, for their part, with the announced attitude of the Government to back them up took legitimate advantage of the strike's illegality. Injunctions against picketing were obtained, and efforts made to employ new hands (who incidentally appear to have been paid a ten-cent an hour increase over the pre-strike wage scale). These steps were keenly resented by the strikers. The resentment though illogical was a natural result of the deadlock. In most strikers' minds the background of illegality had ceased to play any important part.

Finally, about ten days ago, the Government intervened again. It made a slight retreat from the strict legalism of its previous position and made effort to bring the parties together without standing pat on the letter of the law. This break in the deadlock received much support from public opinion but the relief was short-lived; the two negotiators failed to agree on a chairman, the key figure in any arbitration, and the deadlock was resumed. It is difficult not to feel that the government once it had intervened should have continued to make vigorous efforts to bring the parties together again, at the same time taking whatever steps it could to persuade the companies and strikers to avoid steps which, it could be predicted, would lead to violence.

The last ten days have seen another form of intervention of a kind with few precedents here. The Church has come to the support of the strikers and under the instructions of the Quebec's two Archbishops, the Catholic parishes of the province are being asked to

collect funds on behalf of the families of the men out on strike. This is a work of Christian mercy, but it has significance in the dispute itself not to be ignored, especially as it seems clear that the Archbishops recognize the validity of the at least some of the claims made by the striking union which is part of the Catholic Federation of Unions.

Such intervention, by the mere fact of its existence, imposes responsibility in another quarter. To the responsibility of the Government, the companies and the union must now be added the responsibility which has been assumed by the Church. The Church will never condone violence such as broke out yesterday.

Source: Editorial, "Settlement is Imperative in Asbestos," *The Montreal Star* (May 6, 1942): 12.