

FOR A FRESH START

The strike in Quebec's important asbestos producing area has reached a stalemate. Companies and unions stand on their assumed rights. They can no longer talk to one another. Given the illegality of the strike, Quebec authorities stand helpless. Conciliation services are of no value whatever in a situation of this kind. As a result whole towns are distressed. Workers wonder where their next meal is coming from. Merchants stand on the verge of ruin because no one has any money to spend. It's pretty hard to be virtuous on an empty stomach and the danger of violence increases from day to day.

In these circumstances the public interest is affected and it is in the public interest that the parties to this dispute must come together, somehow, and make a fresh start. How to get them together appears to be the heart of the present problem, but with goodwill – and surely all the goodwill built up over the years has not been dissipated – some formula could be devised to get the men back to work and the mines back to production. The bargaining process must be started all over again.

Fresh starts are useful. They are what keep domestic quarrels from degenerating into pitched battles. They can be used in industrial disputes to prevent collapse.

Make no mistake about it, collapse is threatened in the asbestos area. Collapse of the union as well as of the companies. An industry which produces fifty per cent of the world's asbestos is threatened and if these mines cease to produce the livelihood of 400,000 people will be affected.

Now stalemates are never broken unless something, or somebody, gives. Something must give in the asbestos area. No easy formula for achieving this desirable end suggests itself, but surely stubbornness, on the part of either companies or union, has not settled in the point where anyone is prepared to see whole populations starve and an industry ruined to satisfy mistaken notions of vanity or prestige. Nobody wins this kind of a fight; everybody gets hurt.

The companies have declared their willingness to bargain in good faith. Surely a union which has placed itself on the wrong side of the law can do no less. If it persists in its present attitude it destroys the whole process of collective bargaining whereby labor has made such great gains.

We are not immediately concerned about the rights and wrongs of this dispute. What we are concerned to see is that workers and their families eat regularly and that asbestos gets produced again in this province. Neither will be achieved by a knock-down-drag-out battle. This process can end only in disaster for everybody concerned.

What is called for is a confession of error and a fresh start. This process is not without social and religious sanction in this province. The general public will not care whether the confession is made publicly or not. One of the union's reasons for calling this strike in defiance of the law was that the bargaining process took too long. Surely its leaders are convinced by now that a strike is even more time-consuming. However

long the bargaining process may take, people work and eat while it is going on. They do not sit at home in idle bitterness, nursing grievances and contributing to a reservoir of hatred that threatens to burst its dykes as it fills.

The time has come for the injection of a little commonsense into this dispute. It is the duty of leadership to provide it.

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