

AN ABNORMAL STRIKE

As the strike in Asbestos drags on, the practical issues continue to be confused and clouded by the cultivation of an intense emotionalism. This emotionalism hardly seems to be justified by the practical issues themselves. For these issues – especially the rates of pay – do not appear to be notably more serious than those raised in other strikes. But there has been from the start an apparent determination on the part of the union to evade arbitration and to turn the strike into heated struggle after vaster and vaguer objectives.

Some of the influences back of the strike would seem to come from beyond Asbestos itself. More broadly, there is evidence that the Catholic Syndicates in Quebec are involved in a struggle for place and position against the so-called international unions, which have their headquarters in the United States. In this struggle to secure the position of the Catholic Syndicates there has apparently been a decision to abandon the former respect for orderly procedures, and to resort to vehement appeals and spectacular methods.

But as one Roman Catholic observer has pointed out, this decision has involved the Catholic Syndicates in demagogic strategies, and what appears to be a more or less systematic cultivation of hatreds. In Asbestos the appeal has been made to a narrow but intense nationalism. Since it is obvious that international unions can hardly adopt this line, the Catholic Syndicates seem to be developing nationalism, with all its emotionalized appeals, as their own exclusive mode of campaign.

A feature of this appeal appears to be an attack upon the American capital invested in the province of Quebec. The encouragement of capital investment from abroad has been a policy of the present Provincial Government and one of the principal causes of the province's recent industrial development. But the struggle against the company in Asbestos has been led partly on the grounds that it is American-owned. In this manner the struggle has not followed simply along the lines of the representatives of the employees making demands upon the employers within the ordinary scope of arbitration. It has taken on aspects of a bitter nationalistic struggle against the presence of American capital in this province.

Whatever may be reasonably said upon this issue, it is evident that the campaign being waged in Asbestos is not being conducted entirely upon the plane of reason. The type of appeal that is being made is reflected in a recent editorial in *Le Devoir*. In speaking of the Johns Manville Company, this editorial says:

“No shareholder, no director is a Canadian citizen. None is controlled by our laws or accountable for his acts before our courts. Even the higher officials are foreigners who are in this country only because of their professional duty.

“Mr. Foster, manager at Asbestos has had experience in the handling of men by directing black manual laborers in South Africa and in Cuba. He thus possessed the required training to direct French-Canadian miners. Tomorrow, he will perhaps be sent back among the Zulus. He will be in his element there.”

A recurring feature of the strike campaign in Asbestos has been the representation of the lot of workers under American capital as “appalling” or “unimaginable.” Yet the precise facts supporting these claims have never been plainly established.

The scale of wages paid in Asbestos would not seem to be conspicuously low, and would seem capable of adjustment by normal negotiation. Much has been made of the claims that health conditions in the mines have been taking a heavy toll on workers, that the dust has caused tuberculosis in the community, and that there has been a high rate of asbestosis.

It would seem evident, however, as the statistics have been more fully disclosed, that these claims rest upon little foundation. For one thing, medical science has not yet established any direct connection between tuberculosis and asbestosis. In any case, the rate of tuberculosis in Asbestos would seem to be comparatively low, and all five deaths reported in the last year for which figures are available were those of females, who have never worked in the mines. As for asbestosis, it appears that very few cases – possibly only two – have been discovered in Asbestos during the last 50 years.

The merging of a struggle against the international unions into a struggle against international capital is one that may have serious consequences for the future development of the province. But it would seem evident that the strike in Asbestos, from its abnormal length, the disinclination of the union to enter negotiations, the intense emotionalism injected into it largely from without, has come entangled with motives and ambitions not directly related to the workers themselves, nor to their practical welfare.

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