

End of a Strike

The asbestos strike is ended after four long months and the men are moving back to work. There has been jubilation in Asbestos, the last of the mining towns to settle, but it is difficult to determine whether the men are celebrating the return to work or what they think is a strike victory. Certainly some of them, as they go back to the plant, must be wondering what it was that kept them out so long and cost them so much in wages, and what in fact they had won by their action.

For four months a great exporting business has been crippled. The companies have lost money and perhaps markets. The Union's funds have been depleted, workers and their families have suffered deprivation, men, strikers and police, have gone to hospital with broken heads.

What for? The issues of the asbestos strike are not simple, but they are not so complicated as to be impossible of analysis. Much has been made during the strike of the union's feared that it might be smashed. Perhaps this fear became genuine as the strike dragged on, but it did not exist when the strike was first declared. Up to that moment the Catholic Confederation was firmly established and the mine workers federation which forms part of it had on their books the great majority of asbestos workers in Thetford Mines, Black Lake, Asbestos and East Broughton.

Up to this moment then, the union had nothing to fear. It was under no threat from any quarter. Then it struck, illegally. It must now occur to those workers who give any thought to it at all that it was the illegality that jeopardized the union.

The movement of provincial police to the area to in force an injunction followed another illegality. Pickets at that moment were keeping management out of its own plant and had under their control machinery worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. Police action after their arrival may be open to challenge, but the strikers must see that the police first entered the town as a result of the union's own action. If the illegal strike had not been declared police action would have been unnecessary.

All this suggests that the rank and file of the federation should have some questions to put to their leaders. Their leaders have said repeatedly that the whole thing was taken out of their hands, that the strike was declared at the unanimous insistence of the rank and file and against the advice of the leaders. Others, impartial observers, suggest that the men's insistence came only after they had been worked up by speeches from the leaders.

Wherever the truth lies, the men as they go back to work must wonder whether they took the right turning on February 12. By the terms of the back to work settlement they get ten cents an hour more and their jobs are secure. Their jobs were secure before they went on strike and they might have gained the ten cents

by collective bargaining. As it is, it will be a long time before the hourly increase makes-up for the wage losses suffered during the past four months. They can take what comfort they take from the fact that the union has not been smashed, but they may reflect at the same time that no attempt was made to smash it until it jeopardized itself.

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