

Aux Barricades !

One morning last week a blue sedan, with four detectives aboard, sped down a highway toward the Quebec town of Asbestos (pop. 8,500). A heavy truck pulled across the road and the sedan screamed to a skidding stop. A mob of striking asbestos workers sprang from roadside ditches and hedges. They ignored warning police shots, charged in, beat the detectives with lengths of pipe, chair legs and homemade clubs. For the first time in its three months' strike (TIME, Feb. 28), the Canadian and Catholic Confederation of Labor had turned from its policy of nonviolence.

The change was dictated by a rumor that strikebreakers would be brought into the plant of the Canadian Johns-Manville Co., chief employer in Asbestos. Barricades manned by club-wielding strikers were thrown up on all roads into the town. All cars were stopped and searched. Clergymen, doctors and well-known businessmen were allowed to pass and a few newsmen got through. Policemen in Asbestos huddled inside the Johns-Manville property waiting for reinforcements.

Midnight Mass. As night fell, tension mounted around the moonlit road blocks. From Sherbrooke, 40 miles away, word came that a heavily armed force of Provincial Police was mobilizing. Strikers made more rigid searches of every car coming down the highways. Near midnight, all hands left their posts for midnight Mass at the big stone church of Saint-Aimé, where strikers had prayed daily that they would be granted the union security and a 15¢-an-hour wage boost that they had demanded. (Johns-Manville argued that the union-security demand was an attempt to interfere in "managerial policy.") At a union meeting in the church basement, after Mass, the strikers were asked if they wanted to continue the blockade. There was a unanimous "Oui." Then the men piled into waiting trucks, went back to the barricades.

At 2:30 a.m. a line of car lights signaled the coming of the police. There were 40 cars in all, including 24 radio-equipped squad cars and a bus-sized Black Maria loaded with 40 policemen and supplies of tear gas, sub-machine guns, automatics and carbines.

Parish Priest Louis-Philippe Camirand, the union's chaplain, rushed a communiqué to the blockaders. Said he: "You are hopelessly outnumbered. You have done a good day's work. Go home now . . ." When the first police cars pulled up, the barricades were deserted.

Night Patrol. Squad cars patrolling the quieted town brought back word that some of the strikers were hiding out in the basement of the church of Saint-Aimé. Inspector-General Norbert L'Abbé, commanding the police, issued orders to round them, up. A squad of 100 police entered the church, in the basement found seven young strikers who started defending themselves with homemade clubs. They were overpowered and led, bleeding and beaten, to the Black Maria. All night long, more & more strikers, picked up in their homes and on the streets, were loaded into the patrol wagon and taken to jail.



Police & Asbestos Strikers' Weapons
(Associated Press)

Soon after dawn a Sherbrooke lawyer named Hertel O'Bready, acting for the Provincial Police, appeared on the stone steps of Saint-Aimé. From a small red book, he read the hard-fisted Riot Act: "Our Sovereign Lord The King . . . commands all persons . . . immediately to disperse . . . upon pain of . . . imprisonment for life. God save the King."

Two days later the Riot Act was rescinded; at week's end, peace of a kind still reigned in Asbestos. But the strike had caused reverberations far beyond Asbestos; it had set off a crisis between church & state in Quebec.

When the strike started, Premier Maurice Duplessis' Quebec government called it illegal, told the men to go back to work and submit their demands to arbitration. At first the church kept silent, but a fortnight ago the Quebec Bishops' Sacerdotal Commission on Social Studies called on all Catholics, in the name of charity, to aid the strikers through Sunday church collections. Before the commission's report was published, three Duplessis Cabinet ministers went to Ottawa and appealed to the Canadian Papal Delegate, Ildebrando Antoniutti, to intervene. The answer they got was indicated at week's end by Quebec Archbishop Maurice Roy, who asked that the commission statement be read in all pulpits and that strike collections be taken every Sunday until further notice.

Source: [Time Magazine \(Canadian edition\)](#), May 16, 1949, p. 16.