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## ARTICLE

# “À faire un peu de poussière.” Environmental Health and the Asbestos Strike of 1949

**Jessica van Horsen**

THIS WAS NOT THE FIRST STRIKE in Asbestos, Québec, nor would it be the last. The Asbestos Strike of 1949 was, however, the only time workers at the Jeffrey Mine challenged the Johns-Manville Company (JM) over issues of environmental health. While previous studies of the strike of 1949 have focused on the broad socio-political ramifications of the conflict in Québec and throughout the rest of Canada, central to this article is how the people of Asbestos understood and reacted to the particular health hazards they faced by working in, and living next to, the world’s largest chrysotile asbestos mine.

Asbestos is located in the Eastern Townships region of Québec, and is the site of the Jeffrey Mine, which once produced over 80 per cent of the global supply of the mineral.<sup>1</sup> A fibrous product that has the character of a rock that can be broken apart by hand until it resembles raw wool or cotton, asbestos is fireproof, and was woven into a variety of goods that would not burn, rust, or decay with age. These goods were particularly useful in wartime technologies and postwar reconstruction. Because of this, the asbestos industry was booming at the time of the strike, but this boom had a direct impact on the environmental health of Jeffrey Mine workers and the entire community.

Environmental health is a useful way of examining the realities of living next to the massive open-pit Jeffrey Mine. In his examination of lead-processing communities in the United States, environmental historian Christopher Sellers explains that environmental health is inextricably rooted in occupational health. In Asbestos, health was not an issue contained in the mine. Sellers writes that it was industrial hygienists in the early 20th century who first began to view occupational health within a broader environmental frame,

1. *The Canadian Mining Journal*, 22 January 1919, 31.

going beyond the walls of the factory and investigating the community-wide effects of industrialization.<sup>2</sup> Further, in their special issue of *Osiris*, Gregg Mitman, Michelle Murphy, and Christopher Sellers explain that environmental health combines both the history of environments and the history of public health.<sup>3</sup> By bringing this type of historical analysis to the strike of 1949, this article will highlight how central environmental health issues often are in resource community labour disputes.

In a resource community like Asbestos, with dust clouds hovering over the town 24 hours a day, the link between environmental, occupational, and public health is obvious and analytically compelling. In *Clearcutting the Pacific Rainforest*, historian Richard A. Rajala describes how the rapid industrialization of British Columbia's timber industry turned the forest into a "giant factory without a roof."<sup>4</sup> This was true for Asbestos as well, but where Rajala's factory occurred in the distant woods, the one in Asbestos was in the heart of the community. Workers at the Jeffrey Mine were at risk while on the job, yes, but so too were their families playing in local parks, shopping in local stores, and going about their daily lives: the occupational health of Jeffrey Mine workers is one important aspect of the overarching environmental health of the entire community, but it is not the only aspect.

In focusing on the environmental health of Asbestos, this article will specifically discuss asbestosis, the first asbestos-related disease to be diagnosed by medical practitioners,<sup>5</sup> and the particular disease Québec's asbestos workers were alerted to at the start of 1949. Asbestosis is a fibrosis, or hardening, of the fluid in the lungs that happens when microscopic asbestos fibres are inhaled over an extended period of time and build up in the lining of the lungs, preventing them from expanding and contracting as they should. These symptoms lead to death by suffocation. Throughout this article, it is important to remember that asbestosis was an extremely painful way to die, and that the people of Asbestos had a long history of suffering from this disease, although their knowledge of it was limited prior to January 1949. The strike of 1949 was, in part, an attempt by workers to stop the proliferation of asbestosis at the workplace and within the community.

2. Christopher Sellers, "Factory as Environment: Industrial Hygiene, Professional Collaboration and the Modern Sciences of Pollution," *Environmental History Review*, 18 (Spring 1994), 56.

3. Gregg Mitman, Michelle Murphy, and Christopher Sellers, "Introduction: A Cloud Over History," *Osiris*, "Landscapes of Exposure: Knowledge and Illness in Modern Environments," 19, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series (2004), 2.

4. Richard A. Rajala, *Clearcutting the Pacific Rainforest: Production, Science, and Regulation* (Vancouver 1998), 30.

5. The first occurrence of "asbestosis" in medical journals was W.E. Cooke, "Fibrosis of the Lungs Due to the Inhalation of Asbestos Dust," *British Medical Journal*, 2.3317 (26 July 1924), 487. Cooke is also the medical professional who coined the term.

The Asbestos Strike of 1949 has a rich historiography, but one that has yet to adequately address the environmental health foundations of the conflict. In 2004, Esther Delisle and Pierre K. Malouf published *Le Quatuor d'Asbestos: Autour de la grève de l'amiante*, which focuses on the political battle that arose over asbestos-related disease rather than how information on asbestosis affected the workers directly.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, although it has the name of the town in its title, *Le Quatuor* has little to do with the environmental health of Asbestos, focusing instead on the mining community of East Broughton, and comments from popular politicians of the era. Suzanne Clavette followed this publication in 2005 with *Les Dessous d'Asbestos: Une lutte idéologique contre la participation des travailleurs*, which promises to reveal the community's experience of the strike, but again focuses on events and opinions happening outside of Asbestos, and the political changes occurring throughout the province.<sup>7</sup>

Part of the reason for this historiography being slanted in this way is the 1956 collection on the strike edited by Pierre Elliott Trudeau. In his influential introduction, Trudeau wrote that the strike was "a turning point in the entire religious, political, social, and economic history of the Province of Québec."<sup>8</sup> Trudeau's convictions, understandings of what was at stake in the strike, and forceful personality, as well as his subsequent political history of importance, have tended to dominate the historiography of the Asbestos strike. The consequence has been that the strike's demonstrable concerns with environmental health, which were not central in Trudeau's depiction of the Asbestos conflict, have been overshadowed. In the historiography of French Canada and of labour in Québec and Canada, environmental concerns among the Asbestos strikers and their families have been pushed to the periphery.

The reason behind this is understandable: the people involved in initially publicizing the 1949 strike became major figures in Québécois and Canadian political history and have dominated interpretations of the 1949 strike. What is of more importance to this article, however, is how the issue of environmental health developed in the community of Asbestos. This was not the only asbestos-mining town in Québec on strike in 1949, but it was the largest, and offers a fascinating account of how environmental health became part of the conflict.

The present work places environmental health issues at the very centre of the Asbestos strike of 1949. By first examining the history of labour disputes

6. Esther Delisle and Pierre K. Malouf, *Le Quatuor d'Asbestos: Autour de la Grève d'Amiante* (Montréal 2004).

7. Suzanne Clavette, *Les Dessous d'Asbestos: Une Lutte Idéologique Contre la Participation des Travailleurs* (Québec 2005).

8. Pierre Elliott Trudeau, "Epilogue," in Pierre Elliott Trudeau, ed., *The Asbestos Strike*, trans. James Boake (Toronto 1974), 329. Although the original collection was published in French, this article will rely on the 1974 version, which was printed in English.

in the community, a sense of the historical context of the strike and its meanings emerges. Few demands raised in the famous Asbestos strike had not been broached before, and the history of industrial relations in the Jeffrey Mine and other Johns-Manville concerns since World War I suggests that in negotiating with their employers, unionized workers had established common approaches and issues. The one area of negotiations in 1949 that seemed out of place was workers' concerns about dust and its impact on their health, and on the environment of the community as a whole. The 1949 struggle in Asbestos was thus one of those turning points when miners, cognizant of health dangers, stepped outside of what historian Karen Buckley has suggested is a willingness to rely on their masculinity to confront and overcome dangers inherent in the underground work of the mining industry.<sup>9</sup> Throughout much of the first half of the twentieth century it may indeed have been the case in Asbestos, where class relations and negotiating them through strikes and confrontational encounters among workers, their union, and their corporate bosses had become an habitual act of arm twisting, that a masculine workforce was willing to live with all kinds of danger. As this article will show, in 1949 environmental concerns emerged and changed the intensity with which workers struggled to improve their lives of labour and lessen health dangers to themselves and their families.

The issue of environmental health thus fed the determination and desperation of workers who did not want to return to mining work without improved health and safety measures in place. This environmental safety issue also figured forcefully in how JM reacted to the strike of 1949, for the company needed to suppress the dissemination of information regarding the dangers of asbestos in order to keep the industry alive and thriving.

Newspaper accounts and archival records not only provide much of the evidence upon which the analysis of this article proceeds. They also structure the discussion in ways that inevitably focus on the different interests of workers and employers when the issue of environmental health became central. Historian Mary Vipond shows that the mass media both influences, and is influenced by, public perceptions of key events,<sup>10</sup> and I use newspapers to assess how labour conflicts were publicized, even dramatized. Further, in addition to traditional government archives, this article engages with JM's corporate archives, located at the workers compensation litigation-based Asbestos Claims Research Facility (ACRF) in Aurora, Colorado. JM legal council assembled some of these sources, such as the "Asbestos Chronology," in order to train new company attorneys in the practices of occupational health lawsuits. These are valuable records that provide a fascinating examination of how JM was just as concerned

9. Karen Buckley, *Danger, Death and Disaster in the Crowsnest Pass Mines, 1902–1928* (Calgary 2004), 144.

10. See, for example, Mary Vipond, *The Mass Media in Canada*, 3rd edition (Toronto 2000).

over the issue of environmental health as were the workers in Asbestos, but from a completely different perspective.

### **Establishing a Tradition of Cooperation, 1918–1948**

BY 1949, STRIKES HAD BECOME a habitual way Jeffrey Mine workers communicated their needs to JM during a sustained period of negotiation and cooperation. In the introduction to his study, *Working People*, Desmond Morton states that in the 19th century, the “essential characteristic of a worker was dependence. A worker was a *hired* person. It was a status of inferiority which, according to the claims of the people who ran business and government, needed only be temporary.”<sup>11</sup> This dependency was partly based on the abundance of unskilled workers available in industrializing regions, but following World War I this was beginning to change. As workers continued to depend on employers for financial reasons, the increasing dependence employers had on workers weighted this reliance. With the significant demand for resources, manufactured products, and labour triggered by wartime demands, industrial workers and employers across Canada slowly developed a new way of relating to each other.

As soon as JM took ownership of the mine in 1918, workers at the Jeffrey Mine went on strike. There had never before been a labour dispute in the community, but the sudden influx of American ownership, money, and ambition in Asbestos meant that the roles of employer and employee were to be tested. Miners at a neighbouring mining community, Thetford, unionized in 1915, but those at Asbestos had yet to do so. Despite this, there was a severe shortage of manpower to meet the rising global demand for the fireproof mineral, which gave workers bargaining strength. The 1918 strike in Asbestos came at a particularly vulnerable time for JM, as it was already attempting to manage a shortage of workers at the Jeffrey Mine, and the company lost opportunities for profit every day its employees were on strike. The 50 men who went on strike were dynamite handlers inside the Jeffrey Mine. They each made \$3.15 a day, but believed that in the post-war economy, they should be making \$3.50.<sup>12</sup> The 1918 strike was peaceful and the company met its employees’ demands. The dispute highlighted how fundamental workers were to the success of the Jeffrey Mine, and they were becoming increasingly skilled and more difficult to replace. This was the beginning of a period in which authority was somewhat balanced between JM officials and workers at the Jeffrey Mine.

The asbestos industry in this era was extremely profitable and all signs pointed to it becoming even more so. Industry leaders declared the men who chose to work at the Jeffrey Mine rather than enlisting in the army to be heroes, and

11. Desmond Morton, *Working People*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Toronto 1990), 2.

12. “Une Grève se Déclare dans les Mines de la Manville Asbestos Co.,” *La Tribune* (Sherbrooke), 29 May 1918.

likened them to the soldiers who had performed so well in the war.<sup>13</sup> However, JM purchased the Jeffrey Mine in 1918 not because its workers were heroes, but because it was a good business decision, and the Québec government actively recruited British and American investment in the natural resource industries of the province.<sup>14</sup> Asbestos was a single-industry and single-company town, which made the “temporary” aspect of its workforce problematic: if local citizens could not get employment at the Jeffrey Mine, there was little else they could do in the community. Furthermore, if the company chose to dismiss local workers, it would have to look outside the community for replacements, which would not be well received by townspeople.

Good industrial relations in Asbestos were important because of the growing worker unrest throughout Québec and Canada in 1919. During this year alone, there were at least 68 strikes in Montréal and 210 throughout Canada, which was a steep increase in the number of labour conflicts throughout the country.<sup>15</sup> The Winnipeg General Strike of that year lasted over a month and worried government and a wide array of employers. Furthermore, the Communist Party of Québec was formed in May 1919 in Montréal. JM needed to maintain control over its workforce at the Jeffrey Mine, especially as its employees had already shown that they were not adverse to labour action with the 1918 strike, and good company-community relations were a key part of this strategy.

Workers at the Jeffrey Mine were not immune to the changes in labour relations that were occurring across Canada in 1919, and in October of that year, they unionized. Although the majority of unionized workers in Québec, much like the rest of Canada, belonged to American unions, the miners at Asbestos chose an alternative option: *l'Union ouvrière Catholique du Québec*. Sherbrooke's *La Tribune* reported that Jeffrey Mine employees joined the union because they believed it would improve both wages and working conditions.<sup>16</sup> The miners in Asbestos differed from the apparent communists in Montréal and the supposed radicals in Winnipeg: a Catholic union, headed by priests, meant that they had God on their side in labour disputes. *L'Union ouvrière Catholique du Québec* was making advances in the province due to post-war economic success and the aversion those outside Montréal felt towards the radicalism of international unions, evident in the strike in Winnipeg. Having the miners of Asbestos join was a coup for the union because, by 1919, the

13. *The Canadian Mining Journal*, 5 February 1919, 66.

14. Paul-André Linteau, René Durocher, Jean-Claude Robert, and François Ricard, *Québec: A History, 1867–1929*, trans. Robert Chodos (Toronto 1983), 306.

15. Geoffrey Ewen, *The International Unions and the Workers' Revolt in Québec, 1914–1925* (Toronto 1998), 127, and Craig Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement, A Brief History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Toronto 1996), 53.

16. “Formation d'une Union Ouvrière à Asbestos,” *La Tribune*, 15 October 1919.

export of the mineral was making significant contributions to Québec's economy.<sup>17</sup> The industry was of great importance to the province and its workers were valuable to unions.

The Catholic union did not allow those of other faiths to join, but this was not a major issue in Asbestos, where only 15 per cent of the town's population was not Catholic, and most of those were JM officials and their families.<sup>18</sup> The community of Asbestos was divided along linguistic and class lines, with the Francophone population making up the bulk of the workers, and the smaller Anglophone faction running JM. This put an extra communication barrier between the workers and the company, which was solidified when JM refused to recognize the union for decades after its establishment.<sup>19</sup> JM officials did not want unions changing the power structure of the community.

By 1921, however, the Catholic union movement in Québec had grown to six times its size in 1914, and was united under the *Confédération des travailleurs catholiques du Canada* (CTCC).<sup>20</sup> By 1922, the CTCC represented 96 unions and 26,000 workers, and both the Church and the provincial government approved of the organization. This gave the CTCC strength, but its leaders did not seem interested in using it. At its inception, the CTCC was a conservative body committed to French Canadian and Pan-Canadian nationalism through a celebration of both founding nations, a distancing from the British Empire, and an adherence to the social doctrine of the Church.<sup>21</sup> The CTCC operated with a spirit of cooperation between workers and employers based on the belief that labour issues were moral issues. While it was optimistic that both sides in a labour dispute would do what was morally right as dictated by the Church, the idea was based on the *Rerum Novarum*, an encyclical released by Pope Leo XIII in 1891 that encouraged the formation of doctrine-abiding unions by workers who knew that eventually the meek would inherit the earth. The existence, and indeed the strength of the CTCC, the largest labour organization in Canada based on cultural and religious values, indicates how deeply the Catholic Church permeated the lives of the Québécois in the 1920s. Because of its exclusive membership requirements, the CTCC tended to pit French Canadian Catholic workers against foreign, Anglophone, and Protestant officials operating companies in Québec.

17. Theo. C. Denis, "The Mining Industry in the Province of Québec in 1919," *The Canadian Mining Journal*, 4 January 1920, 4.

18. Jean-Pierre Kesteman, Peter Southam, and Diane Saint-Pierre, *Histoire des Cantons de l'Est, Les Régions du Québec* (Sainte-Foy 1998), 276, 490.

19. Marc Vallières, *Des Mines et des Hommes: Histoire de l'Industrie Minérale Québécoise des Origines au Début des Années 1980* (Québec 1989), 215.

20. Jacques Rouillard, *Le Syndicalisme Québécois: Deux Siècles d'Histoire* (Montréal 2004), 40.

21. Jacques Rouillard, *Les Syndicats Nationaux au Québec de 1900 à 1930* (Québec 1979), 223, 225, 227.



During the economic crisis of 1921, however, employment seemed to be more important to Jeffrey Mine workers than unions were, especially after their wages were cut, and they knew others would take their place if given the chance. Industrial relations in Québec's asbestos industry had changed since 1918, and when Thetford workers went on strike in 1921, new employees replaced the miners who attempted to hold out for a raise. Jeffrey Mine workers did not push JM to recognize the union. Despite the unstable economic situation, geologist John A. Dresser continued to believe that "[w]hen one speaks of mining in Québec he is supposed to refer to asbestos, unless he specifies otherwise."<sup>22</sup> The asbestos industry was sure to survive.

Perhaps due to the industry's sustained success, the miners at Thetford went on strike again at the end of April 1923. While short, the strike illustrated how militant the 500 workers at Thetford were when it came to asserting their economic and industrial value. Thetford workers demanded higher wages and the dismissal of Colonel MacNutt, the Assistant Manager of the Asbestos Corporation, a price-setting organization made up of company officials. The strike was not sanctioned by the union and quickly turned violent when workers raided a local hardware store for guns and dynamite, and threatened to blow up part of the town if their demands were not met.<sup>23</sup> The strike was broken soon after and the workers returned to the mines without any changes in management or wages. They went on strike again in the middle of May, but were again unsuccessful.

As Thetford miners were striking at the beginning of the 1920s, workers at the Jeffrey Mine were content not disrupting the order of industry or community. This allowed JM to construct its new manufacturing plant, hire more employees, and make a new partnership with the Phillip Carey Manufacturing Co., another U.S.-based company specializing in asbestos products.<sup>24</sup> Aware that partnerships like this would help bring Asbestos out of its economic downturn, town council further solidified its relationship with JM. Echoing the doctrine of the CTCC, council agreed that it was in the best interest of the community to work in cooperation with the company, as anything that concerned one also concerned the other.<sup>25</sup> The industry was rebounding from the economic downturn by 1927, and the town was growing alongside JM operations.<sup>26</sup>

22. John A. Dresser, "Mining in Québec," *The Canadian Mining Journal*, 17 August 1923, 645.

23. National Archives of Canada (hereafter NAC), Letter from the Deputy Minister of Labour to "Sir," "Strike 22 April 1923," Department of Labour, Strikes and Lockouts, RG 27, Vol. 330, Reel T-2713, 5, and NAC, *Ottawa Journal*, 27 April 1923, "Strike 22 April 1923," Department of Labour, Strikes and Lockouts, RG 27, Vol. 330, Reel T-2713.

24. Kesteman, et al, *Histoire des Cantons de l'Est*, 541.

25. La ville d'Asbestos, Procès-verbal, 5 February 1925, 6.

26. Jock McCulloch and Geoffrey Tweedale, *Defending the Indefensible: The Global Asbestos Industry and Its Fights for Survival* (Oxford 2008), 22.

By the end of the 1920s, the Québec asbestos industry was extracting 300,000 tonnes of the mineral each year, a sharp rise from the 30,000 tonnes it produced at the end of the 19th century. Then the Great Depression happened. In past times, the community had suffered difficult economic situations, as in 1921, but the early 1930s were devastating for Asbestos, as they were to most of the nation. This devastation only increased when JM was forced to close the Jeffrey Mine from May 1932 to April 1933 due to the economic situation.

The closing of the Jeffrey Mine made life difficult for the community. Many residents had few savings and could not survive without a steady wage from JM.<sup>27</sup> While it hired many townspeople back after the closure, the company only operated shortened shifts. In response to the frightening lack of productivity at the Jeffrey Mine, town council voted to try to get other industries to come to the community in July 1934.<sup>28</sup> This was the first of many times the town expressed concern over the community being reliant on one industry, but despite this resolution, and those still to come, no other major industry ever came to Asbestos.

As the Depression continued, the Liberal hold on Québec was slipping and the CTCC began to change its policies in response to a conservative movement sweeping the province. Maurice Duplessis, leader of the *Union nationale*, was elected Premier of Québec in 1936, just as Premier Adélarde Godbout attempted to put an unemployment insurance program in place. Duplessis immediately put an end to any program that distributed provincial money to the unemployed. He believed Québec was, and should remain, a primarily agricultural province and was prepared to intervene in order to support this ideal.<sup>29</sup> The *Union nationale* was a sharp departure from the longstanding Liberals, which had held office since 1897, and the Duplessis government de-prioritized industrial communities like Asbestos.

The Depression and Duplessis' new policies helped illustrate the benefits of collectives to those in industrial towns. Slowly, left-wing organizers began to infiltrate the Catholic Church and its union movement, and leaders wooed workers in the industries of the greatest importance to the province.<sup>30</sup> The union in Asbestos, still unacknowledged by JM, suddenly became energized under the activist leadership of Sherbrooke's Abbé Aubert in 1936.

Jeffrey Mine workers had not pressed JM to recognize their union during the industry's instability. The company built and owned the homes many of them lived in, supplied medical care, and was the main source of revenue and employment in the community: the workers had indeed become dependent

27. See, for example, the appeal of 71 families for financial aid in December 1933 alone: La ville d'Asbestos, Procès-verbal, 6 December 1933, 146.

28. La ville d'Asbestos, Procès-verbal, 16 July 1934, 211.

29. Richard Jones, *Duplessis and the Union Nationale Administration*, ed. Terry Cook, *Canadian Historical Association Historical Booklet*, 35 (Ottawa 1983), 5.

30. Vallières, *Des Mines et des Hommes*, 215.

on JM. While Jeffrey Mine employees did not want to enter into an antagonistic relationship with the company, the Depression and its subsequent relief in 1937, combined with the recent urging of the Catholic union movement, convinced the workers to do as they had done when JM first came to Asbestos, and go on strike to regain some authority over their place at the Jeffrey Mine. The workers demanded a wage increase of 33 per cent and recognition of their Catholic union. These demands were given to the company two weeks before the strike with a promise from JM's C.H. Shoemaker that they would have a response by 22 January. When no response came, the workers in the manufacturing plant walked out and were soon followed by the men in the Jeffrey Mine. In total, 1,100 men and 50 women went on strike for eight days.<sup>31</sup>

The *Toronto Clarion* called this "one of the most important strikes in the province" because of the financial value of the asbestos industry,<sup>32</sup> but the dispute had an even greater significance at the local level: the labour of Jeffrey Mine workers was pulling JM out of the Depression, and their role in the company's success had to be acknowledged. Duplessis demanded that strike negotiations take place in Québec City under government supervision, but the workers refused: this was a dispute that would be settled in Asbestos.<sup>33</sup>

The employees on strike picketed the gates to the mine in such great numbers that JM staff could not enter the buildings. When P.P. Bartleman, the official in charge of JM's employment office, rode his horse around the picketers on the morning of the 26th, the crowd forced him back home. Later that afternoon, Bartleman once again rode around the strikers on his horse, this time pointing his revolver at the crowd and "displaying a spirit of bravado."<sup>34</sup> He was quickly disarmed and taken to the mayor's office where a committee that included three JM officials publicly judged his conduct. The committee then banished Bartleman from Asbestos, and he was put on a train bound for Cornwall, Ontario that night.

Bartleman had worked in Asbestos for almost a decade, and for an impromptu court made up of JM officials and employees on strike to order him out of town was a sign of the strength of the workers and of the company's commitment to maintaining a cooperative spirit within the community. This stood in stark contrast to the failed attempts of the Thetford miners to have their assistant manager fired in 1923. Two days following Bartleman's

31. NAC, "Strike Report, 27 March 1937," Department of Labour, Strikes and Lockouts, RG 27, Vol. 330, Reel T-2713, and NAC, H.K. Sherry, "Strike Report, 2 February 1937," Department of Labour, Strikes and Lockouts, RG 27, Vol. 330, Reel T-2713.

32. NAC, *Toronto Clarion*, 27 January 1937, Department of Labour, Strikes and Lockouts, RG 27, Vol. 330, Reel T-2713.

33. NAC, *Montréal Gazette*, 26 January 1937, Department of Labour, Strikes and Lockouts, RG 27, Vol. 330, Reel T-2713.

34. NAC, *Montréal Gazette*, 27 January 1937, Department of Labour, Strikes and Lockouts, RG 27, Vol. 330, Reel T-2713.

banishment, C.H. Shoemaker returned to Asbestos to participate in strike negotiations. After a day of not coming to any resolution on increased wages, a group of 500 striking workers entered the company's Hotel Iroquois where negotiations were taking place, grabbed Shoemaker, and led him to city hall where they ordered him to leave Asbestos. Despite being one of the officials who had been invited to sit on the local town council,<sup>35</sup> Shoemaker left town the next morning.<sup>36</sup>

H.K. Sherry took over Shoemaker's position in Asbestos and a settlement between JM and its workers was soon reached. Employees received the wage increase they had asked for, as well as recognition of their union. JM President, Lewis H. Brown, wrote to local union leader Olive Cyr, "we depend upon you and your organization to keep the peace and maintain order and preserve property at Asbestos."<sup>37</sup> Brown also published his letter in the major newspapers that covered the labour dispute. The strike was over, the workers had succeeded in getting rid of two upper level officials, and JM entered into its first collective agreement with its Canadian employees and their union.<sup>38</sup> The people of Asbestos had yet to experience an unsuccessful strike.

The company's willingness to cooperate with the workers, as well as its unwillingness to hold those who accosted Shoemaker accountable, demonstrates JM's understanding of the need to compromise with the workers in Asbestos, and that in some ways the company was also dependent on its employees. Shortly following the strike, however, the Duplessis government enacted the Padlock Law, which forbade groups of people meeting to discuss or publish pro-communist ideas and actions, and linked unions to communist entities committed to overthrowing capitalism. Labour relations were changing in the province almost as fast as they were in Asbestos.

The post-strike environment in Asbestos was a cautious one, with attempts made on both sides to improve the relationship between the company and the workers. In February 1938, Canadian JM Director A.O. Dufresne wrote that the company had received a letter, "informing us of complaints made by French-speaking workmen of their inability to get employment in the mines because they could not make themselves understood by the employment agents...who spoke only English. The suggestion is made that the mine companies make it a requisite in the choice of their employment agents that they speak sufficiently

35. La ville d'Asbestos, Procès-verbal, 23 July 1919, 200.

36. NAC, *Toronto Telegram*, 29 January 1937, Department of Labour, Strikes and Lockouts, RG 27, Vol. 330, Reel T-2713.

37. NAC, Lewis H. Brown, JM President, to Olive Cry, President of the National Catholic Syndicat, Asbestos, PQ, 29 January 1937, *Toronto Telegram*, 29 January 1937, Department of Labour, Strikes and Lockouts, RG 27, Vol. 330, Reel T-2713.

38. NAC, *Québec Chronicle Telegram*, 24 March 1937, Department of Labour, Strikes and Lockouts, RG 27, Vol. 330, Reel T-2713.

well French and English.”<sup>39</sup> This decision indicates that one of the problems the workers had with P.P. Bartleman, aside from his antics during the strike, was that he was in charge of the employment office at the Jeffrey Mine yet did not speak French, the only language the majority of employees understood. The communication problems that arose from this situation were frustrating on both sides, and this change of policy was an attempt by JM to build a better relationship with its workers. The company also wrote to the province asking if any of “our local boys” would be eligible for a government-sponsored program that helped French Canadians qualify for executive positions by getting university degrees in Mining Engineering.<sup>40</sup>

Attempts to improve company-worker relations addressed one of the key points of conflict between the two groups: JM management was exclusively Anglophone while almost all Jeffrey Mine employees were Francophone and had no opportunity to rise within company ranks. JM hoped that these changes would minimize this difference, and the animosity that arose from it. On 20 September 1938, Lewis H. Brown stated in the company’s Creed of Management that “business in this country has never been what it could be and never what it yet will be,” and by bringing Francophones into the upper ranks of the company JM would attempt to change the almost exclusively Anglophone business landscape of Québec.<sup>41</sup> Despite this goal, there is no evidence of JM actually instituting any such changes in Asbestos.

This focus on company-community relations quickly changed with the labour demands of the 1940s. Although the outbreak of the war once again closed European markets to asbestos imports, the demand for the mineral rose exponentially because of the growing North American market. The Government of Canada contracted JM to equip the Canadian Army with fireproof material. In 1940, this included over \$50,000 for firefighting equipment, building supplies, and asbestos fabric to make fireproof uniforms.<sup>42</sup> The United States Army and Navy Munitions Board also had asbestos on its “critical minerals” list and was prepared to protect its Canadian suppliers via invasion if enemy powers took control of the mines.<sup>43</sup> Canada was rapidly becoming a fully industrialized nation and the asbestos industry was a major part of this change. During World War I, industry leaders deemed Jeffrey Mine workers

39. Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (hereafter banq), A.O. Dufresne, CJM Director, to “Gentlemen,” 14 February 1938, P182 3A 017 03-01-003B-01; 2000-10-013\3.

40. BANQ, C.M. McGaw, Canadian JM Department of Industrial Relations, to the Department of Labour, Québec, 26 February 1938, P182 3A 017 03-01-003B-01; 2000-10-013\3.

41. Lewis H. Brown, “La Grève d’Asbestos: Rapport sur le fond de la Question et sur la Position de Canadian Johns-Manville Company, Ltd.,” (Montreal 1949), 16.

42. BANQ, “For Release: Director of Public Information,” 26 April 1940, 2, 16 August 1940, 3, 27 September 1940, 4, “Industries de Guerre,” E8 7A 021 03-05-001B-01; 1960-01-040\183 e24.

43. Oliver Bowles and K.G. Warner, “Asbestos,” *Minerals Yearbook*, ed. Herbert Hughes (Washington 1939), 1310.

heroes, and the community was prepared to take on this role once again, especially because most of the eligible men in Asbestos chose not to enlist in the Canadian Forces.<sup>44</sup>

The mass industrialization and urbanization that took place in Québec during World War II shook the Church's hold on the union movement, as more secular labour leaders emerged. Union membership grew across Canada during the war, and by 1943 one in three unionists was on strike. In Québec, where the wartime economy was booming, there were 135 strikes in 1942 alone.<sup>45</sup> Despite this mass organization, there was no unrest in Asbestos. The most socialist activity that occurred was when local citizens founded the "Chez Nous Ideal" in 1942. The aim of the group was to have community members, not JM, construct houses for townspeople so that homeownership would increase and workers would not be dependent on the company for rented accommodation.

Although the clergy, JM, and the Québec government feared that strikes and collective housing organizations meant that the province's working class was becoming increasingly radical, conservatism still reigned in Asbestos. In 1938, the community once again voted to continue the prohibition of alcohol within town boundaries. The workers, who were affectionately described by JM as an "industrial army," successfully lobbied to cancel shifts on Sundays for religious purposes, which was a major coup considering the rising demand for the mineral during the war.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, the local newspaper preached the importance of women staying at home with their children because it believed mothers working industrial jobs led to a sharp rise in juvenile crime.<sup>47</sup> Asbestos also voted in favour of the *Union nationale* in 1944, and the shift back to Duplessis' policies worried leaders of the province's labour movement because his government was anti-union and attracted foreign investors by advertising Québec's docile working class.<sup>48</sup> In 1944, Duplessis enacted the Labour Relations Act, which gave the government the power to recognize or discredit unions and to supervise collective bargaining procedures.

In response to Duplessis' labour policies and the changes in them during the war, the CTCC elected social activist Gérard Picard as its new president. This coincided with the gradual abandonment of the union's policy of cooperation with employers. No longer concerned with the good faith of companies, the post-war CTCC focused on changing how industry was run in the province.

44. *Le Citoyen* (Asbestos), 28 December 1974.

45. Rouillard, *Le Syndicalisme Québécois*, 130.

46. *Johns-Manville Photo*, (September 1944), 2, and *L'Asbestos* (Asbestos), 7 April 1943.

47. *L'Asbestos*, 17 February 1943.

48. Paul-André Linteau, René Durocher, Jean-Claude Robert, and François Ricard, *Québec Since 1930*, trans. Robert Chodos and Ellen Garmaise (Toronto 1991), 222.

The war transformed Québec industrial society and how workers organized. Fuelled by wartime industrial success, Jeffrey Mine workers began a series of short labour disputes in Asbestos that would last for years. The first of these strikes occurred on 22 March 1945, when the men who had been hired to sink shaft mines around the pit went on strike. Eighteen of the 34 shaft sinkers struck, but they were subcontracted workers and were not represented by the union. They demanded higher wages and more reasonable expectations for production, claiming that the footage required of them on a daily basis was almost impossible to reach. JM refused these demands and only two of the striking shaft sinkers returned to the job, with local men replacing the other sixteen, "as fast as they [could] be located."<sup>49</sup>

The strike was unsuccessful, and more labour disputes erupted. Never again, however, would the workers be without a union, and these conflicts highlight the increasingly militant workforce in postwar Asbestos. Going over the major issues of these earlier strikes establishes a foundation of working-class agitation in Asbestos, and the willingness of JM to accommodate the demands of their employees to ensure the smooth functioning of operations at the Jeffrey Mine and in the community.

In November 1945, 300 men and 60 women, all union members working the midnight to 8AM shift at the manufacturing plant, went on a short wildcat strike.<sup>50</sup> In this case, the conflict was not between employees and JM, but rather between unionized and non-unionized workers. Union members complained that non-unionized employees reaped the benefits won from their labour disputes without paying into the union or standing alongside their fellow workers. Non-unionized Jeffrey Mine employees felt unionized workers slowed production by going on strike with outrageous demands. This was a problem Justice Ivan Rand had addressed in Ontario with his ruling on a strike at Ford in 1945. The resulting Rand Formula declared that all employees had to pay union dues, although they would not be forced to join the union.<sup>51</sup> This formula was initially enacted only in Ontario, but it was quickly incorporated into the demands unions throughout Canada made during contract negotiations.

The November 1945 dispute went unresolved and was followed by a four-hour strike on 14 January 1946 that involved 150 Jeffrey Mine railway employees.<sup>52</sup> Reminiscent of the 1937 strike, the men objected to the way they

49. NAC, R.L. Bruneau, Manager, Unemployment Insurance Commission, to Mr. MacLean, Director of Industrial Relations, Department of Labour, Ottawa, 22 March 1945, and Strike Report, 27 March 1945, "Strike 53, March 1945," Department of Labour, Strikes and Lockouts, RG 27, Vol. 440, Reel T-4072.

50. NAC, C.M. McGaw, CJM, Strike Report, 28 November 1945, "Strike 197, November 1945," Department of Labour, Strikes and Lockouts, RG 27, Vol. 443, Reel T-4076.

51. Morton, *Working People*, 186.

52. NAC, Strike Report, 26 January 1946, "Strike 3, January 1946," Department of Labour,

were treated by a JM foreman currently up for promotion. They claimed that he was prone to “swearing when giving orders to his men, being unnecessarily rough at work, expecting too much to be done, [and was] unqualified for the job.”<sup>53</sup> The foreman was refused promotion when the accusations were investigated by JM and found to be true. The strikes in 1937 and 1946 clearly demonstrate that having agency in company promotions and operations was something the workers had a history of demanding and receiving from JM, which influenced the demands of future labour disputes.

Despite the success of the 1946 strike, the union was generally wary of pushing JM too far in this period. When 36 diggers working inside the Jeffrey Mine went on a wildcat strike in May 1946, which prevented 175 pit employees from working because they depended on the striking men, the union ordered them back to work.<sup>54</sup> The dispute only lasted an hour, with both JM and the union rejecting the wage increase employees were demanding. Having the strike stymied by their own union was a blow to Jeffrey Mine workers and demonstrated that even with social activist Gérard Picard as the new president, the CTCG was still less militant than other unions in the province and the workers they represented. As a result of this lack of militancy, the CTCG’s postwar membership dropped to 24.2 per cent of Québec’s union members, down from 37 per cent in 1936.<sup>55</sup> This was frustrating for the workers of Asbestos, especially as JM’s annual report for 1948 acknowledged that profits were continuing to rise.<sup>56</sup>

With the asbestos industry thriving, it seemed to workers that it was an ideal time to negotiate with JM. By the end of 1947, the workers at Asbestos and Thetford successfully lobbied their respective companies to establish uniform contract and negotiation procedures throughout the entire Québec asbestos industry. Despite this agreement, 2,650 workers at Thetford acted independently from those in Asbestos and went on strike in January 1948 in order to gain union security, higher wages, and the adoption of the Rand Formula.<sup>57</sup> The strike lasted almost three days and workers returned to the mines without a resolution.

Although Jeffrey Mine workers did not go on strike with their Thetford counterparts, tension in company-community relations rose. In April 1948, JM

Strikes and Lockouts, RG 27, Vol. 444, Reel T-4076.

53. NAC, R.L. Bruneau, Manager, “Summary,” 16 January 1946, “Strike 3, January 1946,” Department of Labour, Strikes and Lockouts, RG 27, Vol. 444, Reel T-4076.

54. NAC, R.L. Bruneau, “Report on Industrial Dispute,” 3 May 1946, “Strike 71, May 1946,” Department of Labour, Strikes and Lockouts, RG 27, Vol. 445, Reel T-4077.

55. Jones, *Duplessis and the Union Nationale Administration*, 12.

56. McCulloch and Tweedale, *Defending the Indefensible*, 30.

57. NAC, Report on Strike, 20 January 1948, “Strike 1, January 1948,” Department of Labour, Strikes and Lockouts, RG 27, Vol. 461, Reel T-4092.



officials from New York visited the town to discuss improving public relations through a weekly radio show, better circulation of information pamphlets, and closer ties with the local newspaper.<sup>58</sup> The company wanted to avoid a major confrontation with its workers, but following the visit, Québec Minister of Labour Antonio Barrette wrote to the *Commission des relations ouvrières* and the provincial arbitrator that there was “a problem brewing” in Asbestos.<sup>59</sup> Seventy-two Jeffrey Mine employees were upset with JM for introducing new shovels in the pit that required fewer men to work them.<sup>60</sup> This was a major issue that was directly connected to the increasing industrialization of the Jeffrey Mine.

Relations between JM and its employees were crumbling. From January to April 1948, there were 92 suggestions for workplace reform made by Jeffrey Mine workers, more than the entire number given in 1947.<sup>61</sup> Despite letters Barrette sent to JM asking that there be no worker reductions due to new extraction technologies, the company refused and employees became even more agitated. While the workforce reduction these new shovels enabled would not be severe, the provincial arbitration board reported that there was a “serious threat of strike” if it were to happen.<sup>62</sup> The warning went unheeded by JM.

Tied to the concern over the shovels was the union demand for fixed salaries to be included in the new collective agreement that would ensure a steady wage if JM introduced new technologies that made employees redundant. This became even more important when JM announced that the Wool Rock Department at the factory would be closed in July and moved to Toronto where furnace products could be manufactured at a reduced cost.<sup>63</sup> In response, local union leader Armand Larivée wrote to the community’s MNA Albert Goudreau that if the company did not agree to fixed wages for its employees and no reduction in staff, the workers would lose faith in JM and would remember the trouble the company had caused when the next collective agreement was being negotiated.<sup>64</sup>

58. *L'Asbestos*, 16 April 1948.

59. BANQ, Gérard Tremblay, Québec Deputy Minister of Labour, to Paul E. Bernier, Secretary, Commission de Relations ouvrières, 21 April 1948, and Gérard Tremblay, Québec Deputy Minister of Labour, to Cyprien Miron, Director, Service de conciliation et d'arbitrage, 21 April 1948, P659 7C 018 05-02-008B-01; 1982-11-008\1.

60. BANQ, Georges J. Lépine, Government of Québec, “Rapport Préliminaire d'Intervention,” Arbitration Form, E24 7A 021 01-05-003B-01; 1960-01-040 #149, 29 April 1948.

61. *L'Asbestos*, 30 April 1948.

62. BANQ, Cyprien Miron, Director, Service de conciliation et d'arbitrage, to Gérard Tremblay, Québec Deputy Minister of Labour, 10 May 1948, P659 7C 018 05-02-008B-01; 1982-11-008\1.

63. *L'Asbestos*, 14 May 1948.

64. BANQ, Armand Larivée, SNA President, to Albert Goudreau, MLA, 19 June 1948, P659 7C 018 05-02-008B-01; 1982-11-008\1.

As tension rose in Asbestos, there was a provincial election. In January 1948, Duplessis unveiled a new flag for Québec and this, combined with his repeated speeches on provincial autonomy and promises to protect French Canadians from “outsiders,” won his *Union nationale* government another record majority. The people of Asbestos again supported the Duplessis government; their Mayor Adélarde Godbout ran as the *Union nationale* representative for the county of Richmond and won.<sup>65</sup>

The townspeople’s support of the *Union nationale* was shaken, however, with the introduction of the draft provincial labour code Bill 5 in November 1948. This bill was supposed to bring recommendations and suggestions from employers and employees to the provincial government, but the CTCC rejected it completely, not trusting Duplessis would acknowledge the concerns of workers.<sup>66</sup> This was a sharp departure from the spirit of cooperation preached by the Catholic unions before World War II and showed just how much the organization, and the people it represented, had changed. Because of the CTCC’s public and hostile rejection of Bill 5, it was withdrawn from the Québec legislature, making it appear as though the government had retreated under union pressure.<sup>67</sup>

### The Asbestos Strike of 1949

THE DEFEAT OF BILL 5 WAS A SIGNIFICANT VICTORY for the union movement in Québec, but more challenges were to come. On 12 January 1949, *Le Devoir* published a report written by Burton LeDoux, an American investigative journalist of French origin.<sup>68</sup> This report, also published in pamphlet form and distributed by unions province-wide, brought the Québec asbestos industry into a period of crisis. LeDoux’s piece, *L’amiantose à East Broughton: un village de trois mille âmes étouffe dans la poussière*, was an exposé on asbestos-related disease and was published just as CTCC President Gérard Picard arrived in Asbestos with newly appointed Secretary Jean Marchand to negotiate a new collective agreement with JM. The community greeted them with a parade as though they were war heroes returning from the front. Picard and Marchand gave the local union its own flag, and every worker at the Jeffrey Mine and their families were required to attend a meeting with them on 14 January in the basement of St-Aimé church. In the wake of the introduction of the new shovels in the pit and the closing of the Wool Rock Department, contract negotiations

65. *L’Asbestos*, 30 July 1948.

66. Antonio Barrette, *Memoirs*, trans. Marc Sormont (Montréal 1966), 100.

67. Barrette, *Memoirs*, 105.

68. *Le Devoir*, 12 January 1949.

would include issues of salary and job security, but everything changed in the wake of LeDoux's exposé.<sup>69</sup>

Because his report was published in a newspaper, not a medical journal, and in French, rather than English, it reached a much wider audience in Québec than anything that had come before. This report was not the first time Jeffrey Mine workers had heard about the dangers of asbestos, and the union had asked JM for a dust clause to be included in the 1944 collective agreement. This clause was to read, "the Company will take necessary steps to eliminate as much as possible the dust in its operations,"<sup>70</sup> and it came after the issue of environmental health had become a topic of great discussion within the community because of the high absentee rate of female workers at the Jeffrey Mine's Textile Department.<sup>71</sup> Canadian JM President G.K. Foster had insisted at the time that a dust clause was to be accepted only if absolutely necessary and only if rephrased to read: "the Company recognizes the desirability of progressive improvement in the alleviation of any nuisance arising from the existence of dust in its operations, and will continue to pursue its policy of adopting such measures as it may from time to time deem to be practical, having in view the accomplishment of that objective."<sup>72</sup> Altering the statement resulted in vague allusions to dust control rather than an actual dust clause, and the acceptance of this change shows that in 1944 the workers and their union were not as informed of the severity of the health risks asbestos posed. After LeDoux's exposé, however, they were not prepared to settle for a vague mention of dust elimination in their new collective agreement.

LeDoux focused on the asbestos-mining community of East Broughton, about 120 kilometres from Asbestos. The first section of the report was a more general account of the industry and the diseases prevalent among its workers of Québec. He wrote that a much more sophisticated understanding of asbestos-related disease was needed because demand for the mineral continued to increase and Québec had a monopoly on its supply. It was clear that asbestos companies in the province had made millions of dollars while workers were dying of terrible diseases. Utilizing the language of war, LeDoux claimed that "[l]'argent a aussi ses camps de concentration,"<sup>73</sup> and that these concentration camps were the asbestos mining towns of Québec: "l'exploitation des dépôts d'amiante a surtout apporté à ce peuple des misères imméritées, de graves

69. *L'Asbestos*, 14 January 1949.

70. Asbestos Claims Research Facility (hereafter ACRF), G.K. Foster, CJM, memo to A.R. Fisher, CJM, 9 August 1944, "Asbestos Chronology," 34.

71. ACRF, Joan Ross, "Survey of Female Employees in Canadian Textile Department," 1944, "Asbestos Chronology," 34.

72. ACRF, G.K. Foster, CJM, memo to A.R. Fisher, CJM, 9 August 1944, "Asbestos Chronology," 34.

73. Burton LeDoux, *L'Amiantose à East Broughton: Un Village de Trois Mille Âmes Étouffé dans la Poussière* (1949), 55.

maladies qui auraient pu être évitées, et des morts prématurées. Aujourd'hui, 30,000 personnes à peu près habitent la région québécoise de l'amiante. Un quart d'entre elles environ sont exposées à contracter une maladie mortelle, l'amiantose."<sup>74</sup> Equating communities like Asbestos to concentration camps following the horror of the holocaust was a shocking and effective mobilizing technique, especially because the "administration autoritaire" of JM was known throughout the province.<sup>75</sup>

One of LeDoux's main goals was to educate asbestos workers on how the mineral was undermining their health, which is why he wrote the pamphlet in French and in an accessible style. French Canadian medical professionals had been writing about the effects of asbestos on human health throughout the 1940s, but their reports used complex language and remained confined to medical journals.<sup>76</sup> In making this information available in a major newspaper, LeDoux had a greater impact on the province's asbestos workers, and on Québec society as a whole. He claimed it only took two to three years for asbestosis—as hardening of the lining of the lungs leading to suffocation—to develop in workers both young and old, and that every part of the industry created dust that was too small for the eye to see. Anyone who "respire cette poussière durant un certain temps est condamné à la mort," and this included those who lived in the communities surrounding the mines.<sup>77</sup> LeDoux was not a medical professional, but his argument was a convincing one and he put names to the symptoms generations of people in Asbestos had suffered from, but had been told by JM doctors were inconsequential.

LeDoux devoted several pages of his exposé to explaining how the disease asbestosis affected the human body. In a way everyone could understand, he outlined what the impact of the disease would be:

Cela ressemble à l'araignée qui tisse sa toile. La poussière d'amiante, une fois qu'elle a pénétré en grande quantité dans les poumons, agit comme si elle était sous la direction d'une araignée; elle se dépose par endroits où elle forme de longs filaments de tissus fibreux vaguement reliés entre eux en un dessin mal défini et irrégulier.

Comparing this disease to a spider spinning a web tighter and tighter around the lungs was both easy to comprehend and terrifying. LeDoux's report was meant to produce a reaction, to shake workers out of their acceptance of risk so they would fight for their lives. This was why he did not hide any of the frightening effects of asbestosis:

74. LeDoux, *L'Amiantose*, 3.

75. Vallières, *Des Mines et des Hommes*, 216.

76. See, for example, R. Desmeules, L. Rousseau, M. Giroux, and A. Sirois, "Amiantose et Cancers Pulmonaires," *Laval Médical: Bulletin de la société médicale des hôpitaux universitaires Québec*, 6 (March 1941), Louis Rousseau, "Quelque considérations sur l'amiantose," *Laval médical* (1946), and "Tuberculose et Amiantose," *Laval médical* (1947).

77. LeDoux, *L'Amiantose*, 5.

à mesure que la poussière envahit les poumons des lignes de destruction de plus en plus nombreuses s'y forment. Conséquemment, le malade devient de moins en moins capable d'aspirer assez d'oxygène pour répondre aux besoins de son corps...très lentement et à travers les pires angoisses, ses poumons sont progressivement détruits. Il finit par mourir étouffé.

By describing the type of death he believed was awaiting the asbestos workers of Québec, LeDoux countered the assurances company doctors had given over the years to patients who knew they were not physically well, and who saw their friends and family members slowly and painfully die.

A reason why company doctors had been able to pacify employees in the past, LeDoux wrote, was the basic human desire to deny death as being imminent and inevitable. Another reason was that asbestosis develops slowly in the body, so the victim is overtaken by other ailments such as pneumonia, tuberculosis, and heart disease.<sup>78</sup> This explained why cases of asbestosis had not been reported in the past, even though it was such a rampant disease. LeDoux also argued that the relative absence of asbestosis diagnoses in Québec was due to companies and their doctors lying to workers. He provided a list of symptoms so employees could self-diagnose without relying on the suspect assessments of company-funded medical professionals. These included irritation of the nose, throat, and the upper respiratory tubes, shortness of breath, a wet or dry cough, loss of weight and appetite, physical weakness, and chest pain. LeDoux also explained that when these symptoms became noticeable, it was already too late to stop the progression of the disease.

Despite the morbid tone of his report, LeDoux attempted to end on a positive note, writing in capital letters: "L'AMIANTOSE EST INCURABLE, MAIS ON PEUT LA PREVENIR." This statement placed responsibility not in the hands of the companies or doctors, but the workers themselves. Declaring that breathing near any of the Jeffrey Mine's operations could condemn residents to death was an attempt to outrage the community. Exposing company lies about the state of the health of the workforce was done to inspire trade unionists to organize against employers; if they failed to rise to the lethal occasion it was their own fault if they fell fatally ill. LeDoux's piece was discussed in Asbestos' local paper and the local union distributed copies of it as Picard and Marchand arrived in town for negotiations.<sup>79</sup> This was an issue on everyone's minds in Asbestos in January 1949.

Of JM's 2,083 employees at the Jeffrey Mine, 1,733 would be directly affected by the negotiations; this number excluded only those who had worked for the company for less than sixteen years, employees under sixteen years of age, and office staff. While a percentage of JM's workforce came from outside Asbestos, the majority of employees came directly from the community itself, and as the main source of employment for the town, the entire local population was

78. LeDoux, *L'Amiantose*, 5, 6, 8.

79. *L'Asbestos*, various issues from January 1949 and LeDoux, *L'Amiantose*, 58–60.

directly invested in the operations of the Jeffrey Mine. Despite the faith the workers had in Picard and Marchand, negotiations with JM officials broke down after only two weeks.<sup>80</sup>

Issues surrounding wages, job security, the Rand Formula, and vacation time were certainly important to this dispute, but the impact of LeDoux's exposé on an already-disgruntled workforce acted as a trigger for the strike of 1949. Environmental health added an air of fear, panic, and desperation to the conflict, and needs to be more fully examined. Part of this consideration needs to be given to the impact LeDoux's piece also had on JM and its stakeholders. The company had known about the dangers the mineral posed to human health as early as the 1920s but, along with other asbestos companies, managed to suppress the widespread public dissemination of this knowledge until 1949.<sup>81</sup> Just as workers were desperate to prevent environmental health risks, JM was resolute in its concerted efforts to prevent knowledge of these risks from spreading. The industry depended on the mineral being synonymous with safety, not death, and the company was prepared to do whatever it could to keep asbestos-related disease out of the headlines and out of contract negotiations. But the spirit of labour-capital cooperation and compromise in Asbestos had been shattered.

It took only one month between the publication of LeDoux's exposé and Jeffrey Mine workers deciding to go on strike. Within this month, Picard, Marchand, and JM officials were unsuccessful in coming to an agreement on the terms for the new collective agreement, part of which included the union demand for a "dust clause" to mandate better control of the occupational and environmental hazards workers faced at the Jeffrey Mine. Over the duration of the strike, this issue would be overlooked by the press as JM promoted its own view of the conflict that, unsurprisingly, contained no mention of asbestos and health. The workers, however, did not forget their concerns, which was a reason why the strike lasted as long as it did.

Just before midnight on 13 February 1949, Jeffrey Mine workers met in St-Aimé church and, against the advice of their union leaders, voted to strike. Marchand and Picard believed that they could still achieve a settlement with JM, but the desperation of the workers was too great to wait any longer. Furthermore, the strikes Jeffrey Mine employees had engaged in in the past had always been short, and more often than not, successful. Going on strike had become an established and accepted method to negotiate a compromise with JM. Even Jean Marchand believed that the strike would be short: when his

80. BANQ, G.K. Foster, CJM, to Antonio Barrette, Québec Minister of Labour, 31 January 1949, P659 7C 018 05-02-008B-01; 1982-11-008\1.

81. This is based on extensive research of Johns-Manville's corporate archives. More detail on the history of the company's suppression of health-related information and evidence can be found in Jessica van Horssen, "Asbestos, Québec: The Town, The Mineral, and the Local-Global Balance Between the Two," PhD dissertation, The University of Western Ontario, 2010.

friend at *Le Devoir*, Gérard Pelletier, was assigned to cover the dispute for the paper, Marchand told him “si tu as ta brosse à dents, ça suffit. Tu n’as même pas besoin d’un pyjama; cette grève ne durera pas 48 heures.”<sup>82</sup> Pelletier remained in Asbestos for five months. Despite the precedent of short, successful strikes in Asbestos, workers—and union officials—had underestimated how severely LeDoux’s exposé had changed company-community relations: JM would not compromise.

Soon after Jeffrey Mine workers began to strike, every other asbestos mining community in the region except East Broughton—the very town LeDoux had targeted with his exposé—followed. Because they did not wait for an arbitration board to be established, this violated Québec’s *Loi des Relations ouvrières* and the strike was illegal,<sup>83</sup> but this did not concern the workers. The strike eventually involved 5,000 asbestos workers throughout Québec. Because the workers at Asbestos were the first to strike, they also dictated the terms on which the conflict would end. Simply stated, workers wanted a raise of fifteen cents to bring wages to one dollar an hour, plus five cents more for night shifts (which would cost JM an additional \$120,000 each year), job security so machines would not replace workers, more vacation time, union input in promotions, and better dust control to prevent asbestosis. The workers also wanted the adoption of the Rand Formula, requiring three per cent of the wages of all employees, even nonunionized ones, to be paid as union dues.

Situated within the context of the strikes Jeffrey Mine workers had engaged in since 1918, these demands, minus the inclusion of a dust control clause, were actually fairly unremarkable. Through previous strikes, JM had provided adequate pay increases when workers demanded them, and had agreed to the suspension of Sunday shifts during the war despite the ever-increasing demand for the mineral, suggesting more vacation time would not be an outrageous request. Furthermore, on the issue of job security, the company had just announced to its employees that 1948 was “BIG NEWS!” as the company prospered from a postwar boom that led to record profits.<sup>84</sup> The company could afford to retrain and reassign redundant workers at the Jeffrey Mine if officials insisted on the implementation of the new shovels, especially as the workers in the pit provided JM with the vast majority of its asbestos supply. In the spirit of cooperation and negotiation that had dominated labour relations in Asbestos in the past, this seemed reasonable.

On the issue of union input for promotions and company structure, this again is something the company had agreed to in the past, as seen with the banishment of top officials Bartleman and Shoemaker in 1937, and the promotion

82. Gérard Pelletier, *Le Citoyen*, 28 December 1974.

83. BANQ, Antonio Barrette, Québec Minister of Labour, to Jean Marchand, Secretary of the CTCC and Rodolphe Hamel, President of the SNA, no date, P182 3 A017 03-01-003B-01; 2000-10-013\3.

84. *Johns-Manville News Pictorial*, January 1949, 3.

withheld from a railway foreman after the strike in 1946 had pointed out his poor relations with workers. As the strike progressed, JM President Lewis H. Brown wrote to stakeholders and every major media outlet in North America to emphasize this request as being an outrageous attempt to upset the proper dynamics of western capitalism: “the crux of the strike is the insistence by the union leaders that they secure for themselves certain controls over managerial policy. It is the revolutionary doctrine that the right of owners hitherto unchallenged to select management to operate the property must be subjected to the veto power of union leadership.”<sup>85</sup> This, of course, overlooked the fact that the company had been willing to allow employee opinion to influence its managerial structure several times in the past.

The Rand Formula was certainly a contentious issue: if every employee had to pay union dues, there was a greater chance every employee would join the union. This would ensure greater job security and would change the “temporary” status of the working class in Asbestos. The reason the 1945 shaft-sinker strike had been resolved so quickly was that the workers were not affiliated with the union, and sixteen of the eighteen on strike were immediately replaced. By 1949, however, this had changed, and companies could not easily replace the almost 5,000 unionized asbestos workers on strike. Furthermore, by 1949 non-unionized workers were in the vast minority and could not adequately do their jobs at the Jeffrey Mine without the rest of the employees.<sup>86</sup> Because of this, the Rand Formula would not have much practical impact on industrial activities at the mine, and may actually have improved relations amongst workers.

In fact, it seems it was only the issue concerning environmental health that was the most unusual and radical demand in 1949. Workers had asked for a dust clause before, to be sure, but in 1944 employees were not on strike, and the press had not yet published a scandalous exposé on asbestos-related disease that had been read and understood not just by workers, but by a significant portion of the province as well. By 1949, a dust clause could no longer be discretely changed or included: both the workers and the company had too much to lose.

The context of the previous labour disputes in Asbestos, combined with the addition of publicly broadcast environmental health concerns, explains the severity with which both JM and workers reacted to the strike. The company’s reliance on Québec’s provincial police force to put an end to the dispute is a key example of this. Just days after the strike had been declared, 200 workers raided company offices to get their final paycheques.<sup>87</sup> Although this was not an

85. *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), 23 April 1949.

86. There were only 300 non-unionized employees at the Jeffrey Mine in 1949, mostly based in the Manufacturing Plant. These employees were unable to process the raw mineral taken from the mine because those who extracted it for them were on strike. See *Globe and Mail*, 15 February 1949.

87. *La Tribune*, 19 February 1949.



act as severe as accosting two high-level company officials and banishing them from the community, as workers had done with the company's cooperation in the 1937 strike, JM immediately demanded Duplessis send his police force to maintain order in the community. At 2 AM on 20 February, at the request of JM and on Duplessis' orders, 60 provincial policemen arrived in Asbestos. Local Chief of Police Albert Bell reacted to this new presence in Asbestos by telling *La Tribune* that "S'ils viennent, c'est alors que cela va aller mal...Les grévistes sont paisibles et ils n'ont fait aucun dommage à la propriété,"<sup>88</sup> and Pelletier reported that the arrival of the police was "considérée à Asbestos comme un geste de méfiance que rien ne justifie."<sup>89</sup> However, by emphasizing the illegality of the strike and the supposed violent nature of the workers, JM was swaying the focus of the strike away from the issues of health LeDoux's exposé raised, and wooing public opinion in the company's favour. The police force could also potentially hasten an end to the strike by employing a strong-arm technique Jeffrey Mine workers had yet to experience.

This technique was unsuccessful in bringing a quick end to the strike and in preventing violence throughout the community. It did, however, succeed in shifting the media's focus away from the issues of environmental health LeDoux had raised, towards the day-to-day drama unfolding in the community. As the first month of the conflict passed, and as the media became focused on other aspects of the strike, the workers and the people of Asbestos did not forget how terrified LeDoux's report had made them. This can be seen when Jean Marchand held a meeting for the wives and mothers of workers on strike in the church hall on 6 March, as the CTCC wanted to make sure that workers had the support of their families.<sup>90</sup> Marchand's friend, Pelletier, was the only member of the press allowed to attend the meeting and the only one to report on it. He wrote that the hall at St-Aimé was full of "jeunes femmes, de vieilles mamans, quelques enfants pour lesquels on n'avait pas trouvé de gardiennes (ou de gardien, puisque la plupart des papas étaient restés pour une fois à prendre soin de la maison)." The role reversal of wives and mothers at a union meeting while the striking men of Asbestos remained at home shows how much the conflict, and the issues it raised, had affected the whole community. The women listened to union representatives speak about the goals of the strike for two hours and then had the chance to ask questions, which they did with enthusiasm. These questions addressed worries over the union having its certification revoked by the government, concerns about the illegality of the strike, anxiety over how their families were to be supported without any wages, and, of prime importance, fears of what asbestos did to human health. LeDoux's exposé on asbestosis had permeated the entire community, which had seen large clouds of asbestos dust emerge from the pit and factory,

88. *La Tribune*, 21 February 1949.

89. *Le Devoir*, 21 February 1949.

90. *Le Devoir*, 7 March 1949.

hover over the town, coat the laundry drying on outdoor lines, and settle on cars parked on the road, which local children then wrote their names in.

Environmental health was an issue that would not be forgotten by the workers or their families. The fact that it was being overshadowed in the press by the more dramatic aspects of the conflict, including the dynamiting of the train tracks leading from the Jeffrey Mine to the Grand Trunk Railway line on 14 March 1949, and sustained violent attacks on non-unionized workers in the community, did not shake the resolve of workers to have the issue of health addressed in the new collective agreement.<sup>91</sup> This was seen again in April when JM controversially brought in strikebreakers from outside the community to begin working the Jeffrey Mine. Although violently opposed to strikebreakers, ever conscious of the risk the mineral posed to human health, one worker on strike humorously stated that these outsiders were welcome “à faire un peu de poussière.”<sup>92</sup> Three months without wages had not diminished the importance of environmental and occupational health in the minds of workers. JM had yet to publicly acknowledge the health issues raised by workers during the conflict beyond sending a letter to its employees and the local newspaper, which stated that jobs at the Jeffrey Mine were already some of the safest in the country.<sup>93</sup> Despite this assurance, the threat of asbestosis clearly remained a concern for those on strike.

JM needed more than weak assurances to convince its workers to drop the issue of asbestos and health from the dispute. The main JM doctor at the company's health clinic in the community, Kenneth Smith, had written to the company in March urging them to address the very serious issue of asbestos-related disease, but, rather than take his advice, JM had Smith manipulate the medical documents he had on file for Jeffrey Mine workers, and use them to produce a public report that would prove the workforce in Asbestos was disease-free.<sup>94</sup> As Smith complied with his orders, JM also launched a covert medical investigation into the progression of asbestos-related disease in mice. In a letter from JM lawyer J.P. Woodard to Canadian JM president G.K. Foster on 15 April, Woodard detailed this company-funded study on mice, which showed that even a limited exposure to asbestos dust caused serious lung damage. Woodard encouraged Foster to investigate the levels of dust at the Jeffrey Mine to see how dangerous working conditions actually were.<sup>95</sup> If the mineral affected workers the same way it affected mice, the company would

91. For examples of this violence, see *La Tribune*, 15 March 1949; *La Tribune*, 18 April 1949; and *La Tribune*, 25 April 1949.

92. *Le Devoir*, 14 April 1949.

93. *L'Asbestos*, 11 March 1949.

94. ACRF, Kenneth Smith to G.K. Foster, Canadian JM President, 19 March 1949, “Asbestos Chronology,” 50.

95. ACRF, J. Woodard, to G.K. Foster, President, Canadian JM, 15 April 1949, “Asbestos Chronology,” 47.

be inundated with compensation claims and bad publicity that could seriously damage the industry.

Even though this had not yet happened, it did not mean that asbestos-related disease was not progressing in Jeffrey Mine workers, and their newly heightened awareness of the symptoms associated with asbestosis, combined with the recent media coverage of the community, put the company in a difficult position. The issue of dust was connected to a much larger health problem within the asbestos industry, and JM needed to determine how to address the issue without damaging the safe image of the mineral. The longer employees were on strike and publicizing the effects of asbestos dust in the press, the more likely it was for additional studies to be done that would not be subjected to JM privacy agreements. Even though the mineral was not being mined, bags of fibre were still being processed throughout North America and the lungs of these asbestos workers would surely show signs of damage. The strike needed to end before this issue was made even more public.

In an attempt to further diminish the issues of environmental health raised by the strike, JM had Smith issue a statement to the Canadian and American press combatting Burton LeDoux's exposé and the claims of Jeffrey Mine workers. Smith's statement on 20 April was full of conviction, stating that the entire population of Asbestos was a healthy one, and that only two cases of asbestosis had been found in the community in the past 50 years.<sup>96</sup> He further claimed that studies showed that the air quality in Asbestos was similar to any other industrial city in Canada, and that each employee was given yearly x-rays that were available for anyone to see, when annual exams were actually running years behind and nobody outside the company was allowed to see the results.

Smith's statement contradicted everything he had confidentially reported to JM and it showed the degree to which he was involved in covering up the health risks of the mineral. His insistence that the entire community was safe, rather than simply the Jeffrey Mine, illustrates just how profoundly the threat of adverse environmental health had permeated the town. Smith's statements on the relative safety of the community completely contradict his 1949 confidential memo to JM, which stressed the dangers the industry posed to the town of Asbestos, as he had noticed significant exposure in the community down-wind of the mine and mill.<sup>97</sup> Further to this, a confidential report given to W.H. Soutar, Canadian JM Assistant Mine Manager, stated that cancer rates were rising in both Asbestos and Thetford, with 22 workers at the Jeffrey Mine having died of it between 1943 and 1947.<sup>98</sup> If workers and the general

96. ACRF, Kenneth Smith, statement to the press, 20 April 1949, "Asbestos Chronology," 47.

97. ACRF, Kenneth Smith, "Industrial Hygiene—Survey of Men in Dusty Areas," 1949, "Asbestos Chronology," 46.

98. ACRF, Paul Parrott, demographer, to W.H. Soutar, CJM Assistant Mine Manager, 24 May 1949, "Asbestos Chronology," 51.

public found out that in addition to asbestosis, the mineral also caused cancer, JM—and the entire asbestos industry—would be ruined. There could be no acknowledgement of health-related issues in the settlement to the strike, or the collective agreement.

Unaware of the connection between the mineral and cancer, the people of Asbestos continued the pattern of life that had been in place since mid-February. Tension increased as strikers in the neighbouring asbestos community of St-Remi de Tingwick returned to work.<sup>99</sup> While many took this to mean that all those on strike in the asbestos region of Québec would return to their mines and mills, JM wanted to make sure this would be the case. In its June issue of the *Johns-Manville News Pictorial*, the company stated that the people who worked the Jeffrey Mine “have lost more than \$1 1/2 million in wages as a result of the strike. An increase in wages amounting to five dollars a week would have been granted without any strike. With such an increase, it would take each employee over three years to get back what he has lost.”<sup>100</sup> The months without paycheques had been disastrous for a significant portion of the community. Issues of environmental health remained a concern, but families needed to be fed and bills needed to be paid.

When Thetford strikers voted to return to work on 24 June due to desperation and a slightly improved contract, the people of Asbestos knew their strike would not last much longer; they were losing valuable allies. The strike in Asbestos ended after 137 days on 30 June, and an arbitration board was established to negotiate the details of the new collective agreement. After people celebrated throughout the streets of Asbestos at the start of July, the local paper printed the agreement that ended the strike so that everyone would be aware of the terms. Although some issues would be reserved for continued arbitration, the union was to be recertified and JM would bring the striking workers back to their jobs as quickly as production rates allowed.<sup>101</sup>

## Settling the Dust After the Asbestos Strike of 1949

AS THE STRIKE OF 1949 ENDED, company Vice President Vandiver Brown was warned by officials at the Gatke Corporation, JM customers and manufacturers of asbestos-containing insulation, that “unless we do something about [the health effects of asbestos] these little cases will breed like rabbits and they may grow as big as hares.”<sup>102</sup> This was particularly threatening to the company because the strike had brought international attention to the hazards asso-

99. *Le Travail*, June 1949.

100. “Asbestos Production Limited as Strike Continues,” *Johns-Manville News Pictorial*, June 1949, 2.

101. *L'Asbestos*, 8 July 1949.

102. ACRF, Gatke Corporation to Vandiver Brown, JM VP, “Doc 7,” June 1949, 34.

ciated with the mineral. Arbitration meetings continued throughout the second half of 1949 to settle the dispute and come to a resolution on the dust-elimination demands made by workers. A contract clause dealing with the dangers of dust at the Jeffrey Mine would be disastrous for JM, which had always maintained that dust was not a problem. In order to support this position, Kenneth Smith was once again asked to prove the workers in Asbestos were healthy.

Smith did as he was instructed and produced a report for the company that showed how the mineral affected Jeffrey Mine workers. Of the 708 employee x-rays he examined in 1949, Smith found that 89 per cent of them had been in dusty areas for over 20 years and only 4 Jeffrey Mine workers had "normal" lungs. Of the remaining 704, 468 were in the early stages of asbestosis and 7 had full-blown cases.<sup>103</sup> Although JM knew its employees were getting sick, these were shockingly high numbers, especially during contract negotiations to settle a labour dispute that had focused on the issue of health. However, the union officials negotiating the terms of the new collective agreement in Asbestos would never hear of this report.

JM officials absorbed Smith's report with their usual combination of worry for their financial future and confidence in their ability to contain the situation. C.M. McGaw, an official at the Jeffrey Mine involved in the strike arbitration talks, was much more concerned. In the middle of contract negotiations, he forwarded Smith's report to JM's head office and stated that it "shows our tremendous potential liability on exposure. Hope you can help speed approval of the dust control appropriation."<sup>104</sup> Although JM President Lewis H. Brown claimed during the strike that the \$1 million already spent on dust-elimination technology at the Jeffrey Mine was sufficient, Smith's study frightened the company enough that it approved an additional \$5.5 million for better dust control. Company attorney J.P. Woodard wrote to McGaw that he hoped "this will make a real improvement in your working condition situation, both within and without the plant,"<sup>105</sup> which acknowledged how much dust had become a community issue because of the strike and how health reforms needed to be visible both at the Jeffrey Mine and throughout the town of Asbestos.

Despite Woodard's belief that the new funds for dust control would help ease tension in the community following the strike, JM kept both Smith's findings and the plan for improved dust-elimination technology secret during contract negotiations. Admitting there was a dust problem would prove that the company knew the mineral adversely affected its workers, and union heads would use this to their fullest advantage. The company's reputation had

103. ACRF, Kenneth Smith, "Unpublished Report: Survey of Men in Dusty Areas," "Doc 7," 16.

104. ACRF, C.M. McGaw, Canadian JM, to C.W. Hite, JM, August 1949, "Asbestos Chronology," 49.

105. ACRF, J. Woodard to M.C. McGaw, Canadian JM, 18 August 1949, "Asbestos Chronology," 52.

suffered during the strike and would only worsen if it openly acknowledged the health risks the industry posed to the entire community. JM instead relied on the testimony of American doctor John Vorwald during contract negotiations. Vorwald was not directly associated with the company, but had received significant funding from JM to study the progression of cancer in the lungs of dead Jeffrey Mine workers, which had been secretly autopsied and taken to New York State for years.<sup>106</sup>

In the arbitration meetings of 1949, Vorwald downplayed the severity of asbestosis and testified, "I would like to compare lungs with our two arms, two legs and our two eyes. When one goes bad we can use the other one, and we have two lungs in case of disease."<sup>107</sup> When pressed by union lawyers who suggested that this logic meant that if a man without an arm was impaired, a man with asbestosis was as well, Vorwald replied, "No, I don't think so. He has an impairment of his lung tissue but he is not suffering from it." Vorwald's nonchalant attitude is especially shocking considering he had just instructed Smith to commission a confidential inquest into the link between asbestos and cancer because of the presence of it in the stolen lungs from Asbestos he had received in New York State.<sup>108</sup> Vorwald's testimony helped convince the arbitration board to rule in favour of JM, and better dust control was not made part of the new collective agreement in 1949, something the workers would not have accepted at the beginning of the strike.

Health issues took up 10 of the 57 pages of the arbitration ruling, far more than any other topic, and while JM had to publicly admit that asbestos was harmful, it was granted full control over how it dealt with this fact both at the Jeffrey Mine, and throughout the community.<sup>109</sup> There was some debate over how long a worker had to be exposed to the mineral's dust before he or she began to show signs of disease, and uncertainty was expressed over how much dust was too much. Neither the company nor the union leaders were inclined to think asbestos could be mined or processed without dust, and total elimination was not a consideration.

As far as asbestosis was concerned, Vorwald convinced the arbitration board that the company's policy of removing workers from dusty areas when their x-rays showed signs of fibrosis was effective in stopping the progression of the disease, while also allowing the bodies of employees time to heal themselves, falsely suggesting asbestosis was not permanent. JM manipulated medical evidence to maintain the image that the Jeffrey Mine did not give the

106. Gerrit W.H. Schepers, "Chronology of Asbestos Cancer Discoveries: Experimental Studies of the Saranac Laboratory," *American Journal of Industrial Medicine*, 27 (1995), 600.

107. Testimony of John Vorwald in Arbitration of the Asbestos Strike, 1949, as seen in Lloyd Tataryn, *Dying for a Living: The Politics of Industrial Death* (Toronto 1979), 28.

108. ACRF, John Vorwald, Saranac Laboratories, to Kenneth Smith, Canadian JM, 15 October 1949, "Asbestos Chronology," 50.

109. *Le Devoir*, 15 December 1949.

people of Asbestos an incurable, deadly disease. The company did so because if they admitted to the severity of asbestos-related disease, the industry would be seriously threatened and JM was confident that it could contain the problem in the mine and mill.

## Conclusion

THE STRIKE WAS SETTLED AT THE END of 1949 at the height of community concern over environmental health issues. Despite this very real concern, the conflict had changed the people of Asbestos, and job security now overruled the fear and panic LeDoux's exposé had caused at the beginning of 1949. Jeffrey Mine workers would never go on strike again over issues of environmental health. In fact, despite their history of short, successful strikes prior to 1949, workers in Asbestos did not go on strike again until 1975. At this time, information concerning the dangers of asbestos to human health had convinced Thetford workers to strike over health concerns, but when Jeffrey Mine employees followed them they kept their dispute to wages.<sup>110</sup>

This did not mean that workers in Asbestos had forgotten the health risks associated with the Jeffrey Mine, but as the industry really began to suffer because of the mineral's growing international reputation for being dangerous, the community, so dependent on the mine for survival, had developed other ways to lobby JM for better dust control. This included an editorial cartoon in the local paper that depicted a woman crossing the road covering her face against the blowing dust while her dog exclaimed that if he had known she was crossing the desert that day, he would not have gone with her.<sup>111</sup> The air in Asbestos was thick with dust, but while townspeople were frustrated with its presence, the spirit of the editorial cartoon was playful rather than frightened: the urgency concerning environmental health LeDoux's piece had caused in Asbestos in 1949 was gone.

This lack of large-scale agitation was also seen at the Jeffrey Mine. In May 1975, JM's Health, Safety and Environment Vice President Paul Kotkin sent filmmaker Walter Cooper to Asbestos to make a pro-industry documentary called "Asbestos and Health." Upon his arrival, Cooper immediately wrote to Kotkin "the bagging operation on the main floor was shocking. There were accumulations of dust everywhere. It took more than an hour to clean up one bagging unit of visible dust before filming. At another bag unit, I noticed an ankle-high accumulation of fiber [*sic*], which was being shovelled into an open cart for disposal by a worker, who was not wearing a respirator."<sup>112</sup> Cooper's observations offer a rare perspective on what it was like to be at the Jeffrey Mine

110. NAC, "Strike 75-123, February 1975," Department of Labour, Strikes and Lockouts, RG 27, vol. 468.

111. *Le Citoyen*, 13 July 1971.

112. ACRF, Walter Cooper to Paul Kotkin, 29 July 1975, "Asbestos Chronology," 166.

in 1975. He explained, “Fiber continued to spill from the bags onto the floor, where other workers tracked through it...I saw a QC man at the bagging operation open at least four bags, grab a handful of fiber, throw it into an open plate, and then break it apart and swish it around. He did not wear a respirator.”<sup>113</sup> The emphasis he placed on employees at the Jeffrey Mine working without respirators is telling. Protective devices were provided by JM, but because of the amount of dust in the air they clogged easily and workers refused to wear them. In this practice, we can again see Karen Buckley’s earlier-noted idea of how miners have historically confronted risks to their health with a hyper-masculine sense of bravado.

This bravado was further revealed when the company profiled Jeffrey Mine worker Norman Chartier in its 1980 edition of the stakeholder-focused magazine, *JM Today*. Chartier had worked at the Jeffrey Mine for four decades, and had participated in the strike of 1949. His statements were made with the intention of boosting the image of the industry and the mineral the community so depended on. Chartier achieved this by stating that no job was 100 per cent safe, but “if a man uses common sense on the job and follows the rules set down for his protection, he’s more apt to get into trouble when he’s not working” than at the Jeffrey Mine.<sup>114</sup> This was not a statement a worker would likely have made at the start of 1949. The shift away from JM employees emphasizing issues of environmental health through labour disputes or the mass media can be explained by the precarious position the industry was in during the 1970s and 1980s, and the fear that pushing for better environmental health policies would surely hasten the industry’s collapse. As occupational health lawsuits overwhelmed asbestos-producing companies in the United States, JM filed for bankruptcy and sold the Jeffrey Mine in 1983; the dependence the entire community of Asbestos had on the industry was made especially clear.

Through an examination of the history of strikes in Asbestos prior to the 1949 conflict, this article has shown that labour disputes—even those concerning controversial managerial issues—were an accepted form of quick negotiation and cooperation between workers and JM. In bringing the context of labour disputes in Asbestos to the strike of 1949, this article has highlighted the sudden recoiling away from this spirit of employer-employee cooperation as soon as Burton LeDoux and Jeffrey Mine workers publicly raised the issue of environmental health. This changed everything. Although it was often overshadowed by the drama of the day-to-day events of the strike in the press and in the scholarly works that have since emerged, through an examination of the arbitration hearings that settled the dispute, this article has also shown that environmental health was not something workers or JM forgot or capitulated over the five months of the dispute.

113. ACRF, Cooper to Kotkin, 29 July 1975, 166.

114. *JM Today*, 2 (No. 3 1980), 7.



The lack of success workers had in achieving environmental health reform at the Jeffrey Mine during the 1949 conflict, however, seems to have changed the ways in which they negotiated with JM in the decades that followed, with a marked lack of strikes between then and 1975. It also seems to have altered the local perception of environmental health, shifting away from the urgency of Burton LeDoux's exposé, towards a seemingly accepted fact of life when depending on the world's largest chrysotile asbestos mine for community survival. In examining the 1949 strike, this article has highlighted the complex progression of environmental health issues in Asbestos, Québec, which both the workers and JM attempted to define and control.

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