ALTHOUGH I LIVED IN QUEBEC almost ten years before I became a full-time union organizer, I had only a rudimentary knowledge of the French language. But in the early 1940s and 1950s, this was not a great problem for me. At that time English Canadians generally who could not speak French got along quite well, but French-Canadians who could not speak English had scant chance of filling key positions in either industry or unions.

When I spoke to workers in English, they seemed to understand what I was saying. And if some did not understand there was always someone who would give a French version of my message. In those years most union meetings and conferences were conducted in both English and French, but most of the discussions were in English.

The industries that I was trying to organize were in the main war munitions plants in Valleyfield and Boucherville, rubber plants in St. Jérôme, Lachine, and Grenby, mining industries in Murdochville and Thurso, brick manufacturing in Delson, meat packing in Montreal, textile plants in St. Jérôme and Lachute, and aluminum and paper containers in Montreal. In these industries most of management people at all levels were English who either lived in Quebec or who were brought to Quebec from other provinces or countries. Wherever I went in the province, in every industry in which I negotiated, with every government labour conciliator, and before every government appointed arbitration board to which I presented a brief or memorandum, English was the *de facto* language.

As collective agreements were negotiated in English, the company sometimes undertook to provide a French translation and in at least in one agreement to my knowledge (Dominion Rubber Co. in St. Jérôme) it was stipulated that if there appeared to be a discrepancy between the two version of the agreement, the English would be considered to be the official version.

In this case the union negotiating committee consisted of 12 men, and only two of them spoke English. The two who did not speak French were the plant manager, who came from Ontario, and I. The Company personnel officer, who was English with a good knowledge of French, provided the step-by-step translation.

Language certainly proved no impediment to my organizing efforts during World War II.

THE STRUGGLES AT ST. JÉRÔME

IN THE EARLY 1940s St. Jérôme, Quebec, was a community dominated by a small industrial power elite who controlled jobs, determined wages, and affected all aspects of their citizens’ lives. Three companies were involved: Dominion Rubber Company, Rolland Paper Company, and Regent Knitting Mill. For a long time there were no unions in these companies, and when unions did become established, they had great difficulty effecting improvements and getting better working conditions.
The union at the Rolland Paper Mill had the advantage of being part of a strong organization that bargained for all intents and purposes on an industry-wide basis. Our union at Dominion Rubber had a slight advantage in the fact that the large rubber plants in Ontario negotiated with the much stronger international union, the United Rubber, Cork, Linoleum and Plastic Workers of America, which set a pattern for Quebec. But our local union at the Regent Knitting Mill (Local 254) had none of these advantages. Moreover, working conditions in the textile industry in Quebec, and in the country generally, were considerably below those in most other industries. The workers in these plants, however, were by no means docile or subservient to the companies. They fought hard to establish their unions, and then they fought just as hard to win decent wages and working conditions.

Negotiating the first agreement at the Regent Mill was an excruciatingly frustrating experience. The employer was Hyman Grower, who established himself as a one-man negotiating team on the company side. After a good deal of bargaining he would finally agree on a certain condition, and then, at the very next session, he would unashamedly announce that he had changed his mind, or that he had "been advised" not to accept what he had previously agreed to. Worse still, he would sometimes blatantly lie, saying he had not agreed to the condition.

I soon changed the procedure by having each clause of the proposed contract typed on a separate sheet. As a clause was negotiated, with whatever changes were agreed to, I asked Grower and our union president to sign the sheet "to avoid misunderstanding or misinterpretation of what has been agreed to." It seemed to work well, but from then on Grower brought his lawyer to the bargaining sessions.

The negotiations proceeded at a snail's pace, and it became apparent that we would have to submit our demands to arbitration. After several months the arbitration board gave a decision which, once again, was a compromise. Nevertheless, we were willing to accept it, but the company was not. And so, in the winter of 1945, we went on strike.

There were no scabs or strike-breakers. In St. Jérôme no worker would think of scabbing. We maintained an impressive picket line, but because of the terrible cold we had to change pickets every hour. At the union hall a group of workers' wives brewed coffee and made sandwiches. Local grocery stores contributed food and some citizens gave money to help the strikers.

There was at least one amusing incident. On the picket line some of the strikers, suffering from the cold, asked if it might be possible to have a bit of whiskey — "just to warm up." I told them I did not mind buying a few bottles, but it would not be a good idea to drink on the picket line because the community might get the idea that we were "boozing it up." I said I would buy two or three bottles that could be drunk in the union hall. I told them it was important that we not leave ourselves open to criticism, and they said they saw the logic of this, but they still wanted a drink.

Then I had an idea. I telephoned the Chief of Police, whom I had got to know quite well. I told him that the pickets wanted to spike their coffee with a little bit of whiskey because of the severe cold. In order to avoid false rumours, I would like him to assign officers as witnesses. He though the idea had merit, but said he could not assign an officer to be a witness to whiskey drinking.
“Of course not,” I said, “but you could assign them to observe proper behaviour of the pickets, could you not?”

“Yes, I could do that,” he responded.

“Good,” I said. “Could you have them over in half an hour?”

He agreed. I rushed to the liquor store, bought two bottles of rye and returned to the union hall where I gave them to the picket captain, telling him “no more than two ounces in every cup.” The policeman watched with broad smiles as he supervised “proper behaviour.” The picket captain had a most peculiar idea of measurement, but who cared? Soon the cold grim faces of the pickets melted into smiles. Some began to sing, including my favourite French song, “Alouette.”

In the two days that the worst of the cold lasted we bought five bottles, but there was not a ripple of objection in the community. Only the pickets and the police knew about it. Obviously, I had been unnecessarily concerned about our image, not knowing well enough the earthiness of the St. Jérôme workers.

The strike lasted for two bitterly cold weeks, and then the company called me to resume negotiations.

“To negotiate what?” I asked Grower.

“To negotiate the report of the arbitration board,” he replied.

“The board did not make a report,” I explained. “The board rendered a judgment and it is not negotiable. We have already said that we are willing to accept it. Now the ball is in your court. You either accept that decision as it is, or we stay out.”

The following day the company lawyer telephoned to say that Grower was ready to accept the board’s decision. We met, and in due course an agreement was signed. However, labour-management relations at the Regent Mill were never good. They remained strained, and I avoided participating in subsequent negotiations or other dealings with the company, assigning Victor Trudeau, a TLC organizer and a tough negotiator.

ST. JÉRÔME POSTSCRIPT

IN ST. JÉRÔME the Catholic Church openly and strongly supported the workers in their struggles, mainly through the efforts of a highly-admired and respected parish priest, Monsignor Dubois. When I first met him, he was already more than 70 years of age. He was of slight build with thin light hair and watery blue eyes. He spoke slowly in a low voice with measured words, as if he were searching for the right English expression.

When the workers were organizing, he had often encouraged them from the pulpit. A few months before I went to St. Jérôme there had been a strike and Monsignor Dubois made the church basement available to be used as the strike headquarters. In other similar situations the workers always knew that their parish priest would support, encourage, and give them solace in their troubles.

I was introduced to him by Paul Dalpe, who knew him well. The circumstances under which we met arose from a serious threat to jobs in the Dominion Rubber factory. Shortly after the war, Japan, getting back on its industrial feet, began to export rubber footwear to Canada in large quantities. India and Czechoslovakia were also exporting footwear to Canada and Dominion Rubber at St. Jérôme began
eliminating some lines of production and laying off workers. When we raised the matter with the company they said, with honesty and frankness, that they could not possibly compete with the Japanese imports, and they showed us the figures.

The manufacture of rubber footwear was extremely labour-intensive, and because the cost of production in Japan and other countries was so much lower than in Canada, the company said it had no alternative to cutting the volume of its output. Worse, the future of even the curtailed production was highly uncertain. We asked why Japan and other countries were allowed to flood the Canadian market, when there was no need for such imports. We were told it was government policy. I asked why the company had not asked the government to apply reasonable restrictions. The company said the entire footwear industry had petitioned the federal government, but no action had been taken. When I asked why the union had not been asked to join in the petition, there was no answer.

Something had to be done to safeguard the jobs of our members. We held a special meeting of the Executive Committee and someone asked why the union could not go to the government and explain our serious concern, not only for the rubber workers, but for the whole community. We all knew that if Dominion closed it would be catastrophic to the area. And so, through the TLC, I arranged a meeting with officials for the Department of Trade and Commerce, which was headed by the Hon. C.D. Howe, a senior member of the Cabinet. We selected three Executive Board members to go with me and, although it was mid-winter, we decided to hire a taxi in order to go to Ottawa and return the same day. None of us owned a car.

A few days before we were to leave it occurred to me that it would strengthen our case if some well-known and respected citizen joined our delegation to express the concern of the community as a whole. I discussed the idea with Dalpe who said he knew such a person, but he was elderly and might not want to drive all the way to Ottawa and back in such unpredictable weather. The person he had in mind was the parish priest, Monsignor Dubois. He telephoned the Monsignor and we went immediately to see him. I found him very easy to talk to. After we explained the situation concerning imports and the adverse effect on the workers we told him our plans and asked if he would be willing to join us. There was no hesitation or detailed questioning. He just asked when we were going and said he would be ready to be picked up.

Two days later, at seven o'clock in the morning, he was waiting, all bundled up. The narrow road from St. Jérôme to Ottawa turned and twisted in all directions. As luck would have it we had a slight accident when another car slid into our taxi. Despite the wind and cold we all got out to inspect the damage, including the Monsignor. After an exchange of information we continued on our way. The damage had been slight, but much to our regret and discomfort, the car heater had ceased to function. We continued, chilled to the bone. I noticed the Monsignor was a little shaken by the accident, but he made no complaint nor reference to it.

We finally arrived in Ottawa, a little late for our meeting, and found several officials waiting. I introduced myself and the other union officers. Monsignor Dubois was slowly unwrapping himself and I introduced him as “the distinguished representative of the St. Jérôme community.” To our surprise we were told that the
Minister would be joining the meeting, but only for a few minutes because of other commitments. He arrived and as he shook hands with me explained: “Sorry I’m late. I’m busy building a pipeline you know.” His small, sharp, gray eyes sparkled.

He said that, although he could not stay to hear all our story, he knew why we had come. Often the government faced a dilemma and had to cope as best it could, he said. He apologized, shook hands again, and left. Then it was our turn. First I outlined our concerns and specifically requested some form of quota on the importation of rubber footwear. Paul Dalpe also spoke; and then the Monsignor said he would like to add “just an opinion.”

He began by describing the community of St. Jérôme — the absence of serious crime, the extent of the educational facilities, the number of churches. It was a vivid picture of the little community in the Laurentians.

“Why do we have a stable and happy community?” he asked. “Because most of our people have jobs. If our people are laid off there are very few jobs outside our three main industries. What happens to them? Where will they go? What will become of them?”

He pointed at us, “The union cannot give them jobs.”

He pointed to himself, “The Church cannot give them jobs. But they are not asking for jobs, most of them have jobs today. What we are all asking for is that these jobs that my people have will be safeguarded.”

It was a moving speech. He touched us all very deeply with his simple but expressive sentiment. We received the usual government response — appreciation for our visit, assurance that there was now a better understanding of the situation, and a commitment that the Minister would do all in his power to meet our request, at least partially.

The meeting had lasted almost two hours. When it was over we all bundled back into the taxi and began our journey back to St. Jérôme. It was dark when we arrived and drove the Monsignor to his home. We all got out to shake his hand and thank him most sincerely for joining us and making such an effective speech. In his humble way he thanked us, thinking it might be of some help. Then, just before he entered the doorway, he turned, and speaking French said: “I’ll see you all in church on Sunday.”

The government never did take any steps whatsoever to curb the importations, and as a result more and more of the workers at St. Jérôme were laid off. In a few years production stopped completely.

BACK TO THE 18TH CENTURY

THE CANADIAN REFRACTORIES MINE at Kilmar, Quebec, some 30 miles north-east of Montreal, produced magnesite, which was used in the manufacture of brick used for lining blast furnaces in steel mills and similar operations.

When I first visited Kilmar, I was shocked at the living and working conditions of the miners. Dust from the mine covered the entire community, making it a desolate white area with not a tree or a blade of grass. The miners’ homes were small, crudely-constructed log cabins without water or sanitary facilities. The single men lived in bunkhouses under similar conditions. I talked to one man,
Lucien Tremblay, who later became vice-president of our union. He told me he had lived in Kilmar for 30 years, and had never had a bathroom in his house.

In the process of organizing the workers into the Federal Local 245 I made an appointment to see the plant manager, Norman Pitt. He was a tall slender Englishman with a thin pointed face, small gray eyes, and a mouth that seemed never to have smiled. I remember our conversation well.

"Mr. Pitt, I very much appreciate meeting with you. As you are no doubt aware the Trades and Labour Congress is organizing the workers in your company, and we hope that, in due course, we can establish good relations with you," I opened.

He replied, "Mr. Swerdlow, first I have difficulty pronouncing your name. Secondly, I didn’t want to refuse to see you because I didn’t know exactly what you wanted to see me about. Thirdly, I can’t stop you from organizing my employees, but I certainly have no intention of negotiating a union agreement with you or anyone else. Now, if you would be good enough, I am busy, that is all the time I can give you."

I said, "Very well," and left the office. I then convened a meeting of the workers and related the conversation with their manager. They were furious, and then and there voted to strike. The following day I telephoned the company from Montreal and told the person who answered the telephone that as of a certain date the workers would strike. The strike took place as scheduled and lasted about three hours. Then Pitt telephoned me, and our conversation went along these lines:

"Hello Mr. Swerdlow, how are you today? I guess there must have been some misunderstanding between us. It seems you reported to your union that I would not negotiate with you."

"That is correct Mr. Pitt, that is exactly what you said to me."

"I think, Mr. Swerdlow, you took me too literally. Why don’t you come over to the plant and we can talk this thing over."

"I would be more than happy to do that, Mr. Pitt."

Shortly after, Canadian Refractories recognized our union and negotiated an agreement with us. Moreover, Pitt became a good friend of the TLC. Our relationship thereafter was as good as one could expect. But something should be said about the first agreement I negotiated with the company. It contained some unique provisions, such as: "The company undertakes to install running water and toilet facilities in the homes of the workers at the earliest possible date. The company will also provide, at once, adequate sheets and blankets for the needs of the bunkhouse."

This clearly indicated the living conditions that prevailed in the mid-twentieth century at Kilmar, before the union arrived.

MEN AND MACHINES

THE CANADIAN IMPORT COMPANY, a branch of the Dominion Steel and Coal Corporation, was located at the Port of Montreal, engaged in unloading coal from ships. Specifically, a crew of 18 men would go down each hold and shovel coal to the opening so that it could be removed. Our local, Federal Union 102, was small in numbers but strong in organization. The members took their union very seriously.
One day the company announced that it was bringing in "mechanical trimmers." These were small tractors that were lowered in to move the coal, thus replacing the 18 men. Our collective agreement clearly stated that each gang should consist of 18 men; consequently, reducing the size of the gang was contrary to the agreement. The company agreed with us on this point and the six mechanical trimmers were put in storage on the company's property. In the four months remaining for the agreement the workers walking by looked at the trimmers, wondering if and when they would lose their jobs, replaced by machines.

We knew, of course, that once the agreement expired the company intended bringing in the machines and laying off men. I also knew that the problem could not be solved by discussion with the management. We would have to go to arbitration, and we did. This was at a period in which a number of companies were introducing some form of higher technology or "automation," as it was loosely described. I thought a great deal about the presentation we would make to the arbitration board. The introduction of new forms of mechanization is usually done in the name of "progress," but I have always equated progress in terms of human values and human welfare. I decided to approach the problem on that ground. When the arbitration board was finally set up the parties agreed upon Judge Charles Gurin as chairman. I knew him to be a fine, warm human being and a devout Catholic.

I went to see Father O'Connell at the Thomas More Institute in Montreal to ask for his assistance in preparing a case on humane grounds. He suggested I should read the encyclical entitled "Rerum Novarum." I found a great deal of common sense and fairness in the encyclical and quoted from it at length in my presentation. Finally the company's lawyer, Tommy Carr, interrupted, saying: "Mr. Chairman, I protest Mr. Swerdlow coming here as if he were speaking from the pulpit and quoting a lot of...." He was searching for the appropriate word, and I am afraid I put it in his mouth when I suggested: "A lot of junk."

"Yes, a great deal of junk," he blurted out. Judge Gurin looked at him, and then after making a note on his papers, asked me to continue.

The outcome of the case was that the board ruled: (1) None of the workers were to be laid off because of the introduction of the machines; (2) If a worker quit or retired, a new worker did not necessarily have to be engaged; (3) There should be no forced early retirement; in other words, the company could introduce the mechanical trimmers, but not at the expense of laid-off workers. The company accepted the decision.

This was the first such arbitration case in the Province of Quebec.

THE CASE OF THE SLIDE RULE

AN UNUSUAL SITUATION involving the use of a slide rule occurred at the British Rubber Company at Lachine, Quebec. The company, which was established shortly after World War II, manufactured rubber footwear. We began to organize the plant before it was fully operational, and after a comparatively short campaign we succeeded in signing up a majority of the employees and obtaining certification. In due course we opened negotiations, which were in the main patterned after the collective agreement at the Dominion Rubber Company at St. Jérôme.
However, because the company had begun to manufacture only six or seven months before the union was established, a proper wage pattern had not been established. In the rubber footwear industry throughout Canada most workers were on some form of job evaluation. As soon as our negotiations began, the company engaged an industrial engineer to introduce what they called “a universally accepted scientific job evaluation system.”

The engineer employed was Claude Marion, who, we were told, was highly experienced and trained in introducing, developing, and refining job evaluation systems to determine wage rates. But, when the time came to consider and analyze the many, many jobs in the plant, trying to relate the value of one job to another, we ran into considerable difficulties with the company.

The introduction of job evaluation in any plant is not an easy operation. It involves a great deal of minute detail in the comparison of different jobs. There is a great deal of stopwatch timing and lengthy discussion as to which worker is to be used as a criteria to establish the time required for a particular operation. It is a highly complicated procedure.

When I first met Marion, he seemed a very pleasant, low-profile person. He did not appear overly set in his opinions. He looked like, and obviously was, a scholarly person who knew his function. He had been employed by the company to perform certain duties in a specified time. The union executive had to meet with him frequently to discuss each and every job, and to try to agree on a formula establishing a minimum rate, and then the escalation of reward based on the quality and quantity of production. In establishing a formula, industrial engineers, by their very nature, rely on the answers they get from their slide rule. Marion had a very impressive rule, more than a foot in length, which he carried continually, using it at every opportunity.

The agreement specified two objectives with regard to job evaluation: it had to be fair, and it had to be understood by the workers so they would know exactly what they were earning, based on quantity and quality of their work. Of course, none of the union officers understood the mysteries of the slide rule. Thus, when Marion used his rule to substantiate a point, it had little meaning to them. He would show a union officer the answer on his instrument, but it had no meaning and atmosphere of distrust quickly developed between the officers and the engineer. Their relationship deteriorated.

Finally, Marion called my officer and said he had a problem.

“I don’t seem to be able to get along with your union boys, and I don’t know the reason,” he said. “Believe me, Mr. Swerdlow, I am leaning over backward to introduce the kind of system that will give the workers everything they are entitled to, but I just don’t seem to be able to win the confidence of the union boys.”

I told him our people were reasonable and intelligent and that there must be something I didn’t know about. Marion said it was essential that they get along together if an equitable wage system were to be developed. I said I would try to find out what the difficulty was.

Several days later I met with the president of the local, Marcel Ouelette, and asked him how they were getting along with Marion.
"We are not getting along," he said.
"Why not?" I asked.
"We can't speak to that guy."
"Why not?"

"You know, brother Max, every time we speak to that guy and raise an issue or a problem, he doesn't talk back to you. You know what he does? He pulls out his slide rule and pushes it one way and pulls it another, and then he says: 'There is the answer.' You can't dispute that. I look at the slide rule, but I don't know what he is talking about. Every time you talk to Marion all his answers are on the slide rule."

I went to Marion and told him what I thought. He seemed to feel I had a point and asked what he should do. I suggested he teach the president of the local, and perhaps the secretary, how to read a slide rule, which should be possible to do in a few days, or at the most a week. He said he would. I didn't hear anything further for several weeks and then there were some discussions with the company in which I was involved. With considerable inner amusement I noticed the president of the local had a slide rule sticking out of his overall pocket and, from time to time, he would use it to ascertain a figure. It was not a subject of conversation, but I did ask both the president and Marion how they were getting along, and they both said the situation had improved considerably.

When Marion completed his work his contract with the company terminated. Shortly after, when the union and the company reached an impasse on a number of job classifications, which became subject to arbitration, the union engaged him to prepare and present our case. As I listened to the proceedings my thoughts drifted back to Marion's mystic slide rule, and I was amused at the turn of events.

THE MISSING TABLEWARE

Shortly, after the signing of the first agreement at Defence Industries Limited at Verdun, I met with the senior supervisor of personnel to discuss a number of in-plant matters, such as establishing a union office on the premises, union bulletin boards, and so on. When we neared the end of the meeting the supervisor, Eric Taylor, told me the company had a difficult problem and needed the full cooperation of the union to find a solution.

"What is the problem?" I asked.
"Well," he said, "someone in the plant is stealing tableware from the cafeteria."

I was not sure I had heard him correctly.

He continued very seriously: "Yes," he repeated. "Tableware has been vanishing mysteriously, and in increasing numbers."

I still thought he was joking and said: "Come on Eric, why make such a fuss over a few missing spoons."

He almost jumped out of his chair, bellowing: "Just a couple of spoons? Let me tell you what a couple consists of."

He took a typewritten sheet from his desk drawer and holding it up said it was an article to be printed in the company's monthly publication, "Silver Bulletin." I read:
Within a year 14,640 or more table articles have been taken. This enormous figure breaks down into 7,200 teaspoons, 2,400 knives, 2,800 forks and 2,160 soup spoons. Recently 600 teaspoons were brought in on a Monday, by Wednesday night 219 were missing. This is an important matter around DIL these days, for if the supply of tableware continues to disappear, there looms the prospect of each employee having to bring his own eating equipment.

I must admit I was impressed with someone's enterprise, but I asked in what way the union could co-operate in solving the problem.

"Just tell your boys to keep their eyes open and report to me personally anyone seen taking the tableware," he replied.

"No Eric," I said. "The union can't be policeman for the company."

"Of course not, but your boys can co-operate, can't they?"

"That kind of co-operation means fingering someone and that is not our job," I answered. "You better solve the problem yourself."

The discussion ended on that note and I heard nothing more about the case. It seemed to me someone must have been taking the cutlery and selling it, an ingenious way to make an extra buck.

HELPING COMPANY COMMUNICATIONS

WITH SOME 45 LOCALS to service, we were very much involved in settling grievances, most of which were related to conditions clearly outlined in the agreement. One such occasion occurred at the Dominion Tar and Chemical Company at Delson, Quebec. There the company produced a variety of chemicals. The workers were represented by Federal Local 174.

In the plant there was a designated area where highly inflammable chemicals were stored and smoking was strictly prohibited. On this occasion a worker who had 15 years service went there to get some material, and, without thinking, lit a cigarette. A foreman arrived and saw him smoking. The employee was immediately ordered out of the section and told not to bother going to the head office but to go home. The following day the man returned to the plant to report for work and was told he had been fired. He protested, and the local union president took the grievance to the plant manager, asking the reason for his discharge. The manager carefully explained the danger of smoking in that area and pointed out that there were "No Smoking" signs all over the place. Furthermore, our agreement specifically stated that smoking in prohibited areas was a cause for reprimand or dismissal.

The union president telephoned me and told me what had happened. "Well, what can be done?" I asked. "Obviously he was wrong. He should have known better, but let me think about it. Maybe I can come up with a solution, but clearly we don't have a case."

I thought about it a great deal, and finally decided I should talk, not with the plant manager, who was just doing his job, but with the president of the company, a Mr. Prudhomme, at the head office in Montreal. I arranged an appointment and when we met he impressed me as being a very sensible and kind man. However, he saw no excuse for the employee, who, he said, should have known better than violating such an important rule.
I asked him just how important it was that there should be no smoking in that area, and I must say he gave me an explanation that I had not realized. He told me that within a combined area there was dust which, if ignited, could cause a very serious explosion. Moreover, and this was a point he emphasized, the plant was heavily insured against fires and explosions, and if the insurance company learned that an employee was caught smoking in a prohibited area was not reprimanded, the insurance could either be cancelled or the premiums raised significantly. I could not counteract that argument, but as he was talking, a thought crossed my mind.

"Mr. Prudhomme, to what extent are the workers aware of the real danger of smoking in prohibited areas?" I asked.

"The insurance company insists on many visible signs and we have complied with that condition," he said. "The signs are in both French and English, 'No Smoking Allowed.'"

"Yes, of course," I said, "but that does not necessarily mean that if one violated the restriction he is, in fact, endangering his own life and the lives of others, as well as the property."

"I suppose that is right," Prudhomme agreed.

"Mr. Prudhomme," I went on, "you are quite within your rights in dismissing this worker, I am not disputing that. However, how sure are you that another workers won't do the same thing? How sure are you that the workers really understand the danger of smoking in the prohibited areas? The fact that you have signs on the wall does not necessarily emphasize the seriousness and possible consequence of smoking there. Don't you think the whole cause of safety would be better served if, in addition to the signs, which may be meaningless, you took the time to explain why the signs are there and what might happen if they are ignored? Why don't you explain to them so they can understand the danger of lighting a match in an area filled with explosive dust?

He pondered the question, then replied: "Well you're right. We haven't really conveyed to the workers the seriousness and the danger, but there is nothing I can do about the chap who was fired. The plant manager fired him and I'm not going over his head. What do you think the plant manager would look like if, as a result of you and I meeting, I was to overrule his decision?"

"That's the last thing I would want you to do, Mr. Prudhomme."

"Mr. Swerdlow," he asked, a bit impatiently, "what are you asking me to do?"

"First," I said, "I recommend that very soon you ask the plant manager to convene a meeting of all your employees — there are about 120 of them. Get them together, refer to the worker who was fired and I'm not going over his head. What do you think the plant manager would look like if, as a result of you and I meeting, I was to overrule his decision?"

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even three, call him back, after you have this meeting with the employees. The man could be told that because of his long years of service, and because there are no other industries in Delson where he might find work, he will be given another chance. The result will be that you have accomplished your objective in impressing the workers, and the plant manager will be regarded as a good and pretty generous guy. In a small community like Delson that is an important consideration.”

Prudhomme was obviously impressed; he said he thought my ideas had merit. The dismissal of the employee was, after all, intended to warn the others, and he thought the idea of explaining the seriousness of the situation was sound. He said he would think about it and telephone me in a few days.

Before leaving his office I thought there was one other point I should make.

“Mr. Prudhomme,” I said, “my discussion with you is obviously not a condition that would allow us to go through the normal grievance procedure, arbitration or what have you. I am not suggesting for a moment that I will go back to the local and tell the president and the executive that I have met with you. I am not interested in winning a grievance. I am interested in one thing only — I would like to see the worker re-employed, and I would like to see safety assured. I am not seeking a minor victory; I am seeking a solution. If the situation is resolved, more or less along the lines I have suggested, the union will be satisfied, and so will you.”

We shook hands, he thanked me and I left. A few days later he telephoned and told me he had spoken to the plant manager and to the insurance company. The whole situation had been discussed with the employees, who were clearly impressed. At the same time he had informed the workers that the dismissal of the individual would be reconsidered. About a week later the man was called in and offered his job back, on condition that he never again violate the regulations.

I never told the president or officers of the local of my meeting with Prudhomme. It was not important that they know. I was quite content that the worker was re-employed. After all, that was the important thing, wasn’t it?

LOVE IN THE STOREROOM

ON ONE OCCASION an absolutely unique incident took place at the Lachine plant of British Rubber. In all my experiences in settling grievances, and in conciliation and arbitration cases, this was the only time I was ever confronted with such circumstances. The case involved a young man and woman who were found by their supervisor in a storeroom in the process of making love. Naturally it was a very embarrassing situation for them, as well as for the supervisor. The matter was reported to the assistant manager, Gerry Dolan, who telephoned asking me to come to the plant as quickly as possible. When I enquired what the problem was he gave a sketchy explanation and said he intended dismissing the employees, but wanted to discuss it with me first.

At the plant he related what he had been told by the supervisor. I accepted the story, having no reason to believe it to be false. However, when Dolan said he was going to dismiss the employees, I asked on what ground.

“On the ground of making love,” he replied.

“Gerry,” I said, “the conditions of dismissal are embodied in the collective
agreement, and there is nothing there that says lovemaking is a cause for dismissal.”

“How could a collective agreement embody such a condition?” he asked.

“I’m not suggesting it should,” I went on, “but the fact remains that dismissing an employee is serious business, and that is why the agreement specifies the conditions for which an employee may be dismissed — and lovemaking is not one of the conditions.”

He had become impatient and somewhat agitated.

“Max, you can’t sit there and tell me that when a man and a woman go into the storeroom and make love that is all right and they should not be reprimanded.”

“Perhaps some form of discipline might be taken,” I suggested, “but I could not support, and in fact would fight like hell against the dismissal of these two employees. After all, Gerry, are you so set against making love? What objection do you have?”

“Max,” he said, “I have nothing against lovemaking, but I object to lovemaking on company time and on company property.”

I laughed, and after a moment he joined in. When he cooled down we tried to discuss the matter in a more serious vein. I said I thought the idea of dismissal should be forgotten. We searched for another means to discipline the employees and finally found it in the agreement. They should have a mild reprimand for “leaving the place of work without permission.” This was written into the contract as grounds for disciplinary action.

Well, in all the years I had been involved in the settlement of grievances I had never experienced such a situation.