

August 2, 2023 - No. 43

Salt Workers Deliberate on a Way Forward
Workers Gain More Confidence in Their No!
to Union-Busting



- **Stone Canyon's Destructive Activities With a Critical Canadian Resource**
- **Is Stone Canyon Hiding Its "Leadership"?**

Salt Workers Deliberate on a Way Forward
Workers Gain More Confidence in Their No!
to Union-Busting

Following the rejection of the tentative agreement by miners at the Ojibway Salt Mine in Windsor, Ontario, the miners as well as production and clerical workers in the other two bargaining units of Windsor Salt are discussing the situation and how to make progress. The picket lines are organized so that workers from all three bargaining units on strike do their picket duty together. This has greatly strengthened their unity and camaraderie as they discuss concerns, questions and opinions openly with one another to address company and media attempts to divide them.

One of the significant matters being discussed is the tentative agreement the miners rejected. Workers from the other bargaining units did not face the same concessionary demands to destroy seniority and they are clear that the miners had no other option than to vote *No*. Despite differences in each offer, workers report that they can see that the company considers all of them disposable. They will not permit their ranks to be broken, they say. One provision in particular the workers highlight as they look back through the offers they were given is an attempt by the company to downgrade health and safety standards which were put in place in response to workers injured on the job.



For instance, the company wants to have maintenance workers work in the mine and above ground alone. Under the existing contract, maintenance workers work in teams of two. This comes out of the experience where a maintenance worker was working on a stacking machine and was sucked into it. Another worker happened to see the incident and jumped into action to save him. Following this experience language was specifically put into the contract to ensure that maintenance workers were not left alone and another worker of the same trade must be with them at all times when on the job. The tentative agreement would have eliminated this requirement and put maintenance workers lives at risk in return for minor increases in their wages. This makes it clear that to this company workers' lives and the fate of their families are negotiable something the workers will never accept.

There are several others things of like kind which they are now identifying which give them even more confidence in their decision to not accept this contract.

For instance, they reject the way the company is trying to bring in new tiers of wages. This is done by introducing new categories of workers who would receive different wage scales based on the training they have received. However training would be up to the company and the workers know it would be used to further divide their ranks.

In another part of the tentative agreement, existing provisions that allow for union time for a union rep to access a worker's WSIB claim information and to assist with the claim would be removed, meaning the union would be limited in its ability to assist a worker injured on the job navigate the WSIB process and hold the company to account for how they report workplace injuries.

As they have throughout the strike the workers have forged their unity through discussion and frank exchanges of views so that they are all on the same page. They are evermore clear that it is this unity which is their strength and it is giving them confidence to hold their line.



Stone Canyon's Destructive Activities with a Critical Canadian Resource

As salt workers on strike at Windsor Salt in Windsor, Ontario reflect on events leading up to their strike, and the way the company's owner Stone Canyon Industries Holdings Inc. has acted to prolong the strike, now in its sixth month, they are reaching the conclusion that the company is engaged in a high stakes and destructive gamble to make as much money as possible in the short term. As they deliberate together on their aims and those of Stone Canyon they are asking if the company is engaged in a form of price-fixing.

Price-fixing is defined as "maintaining of prices at a certain level by agreement between competing sellers." Canadians have recent experience with this dirty practice. On June 22, Canada Bread admitted that from 2001 to 2015 it colluded with Weston Foods, the other top bread producer in Canada, to increase the price of various bagged and sliced bread products including sandwich bread, hot dog buns and rolls, a price fixing scheme that also involved retailers Loblaw, Walmart, Metro and Giant Tiger. At the time of this illegal arrangement Loblaw Companies Limited and Weston Foods were both subsidiaries of George Weston Limited, an alleged "family-run business," while Canada Bread was then owned by Maple Leaf Foods.[1]



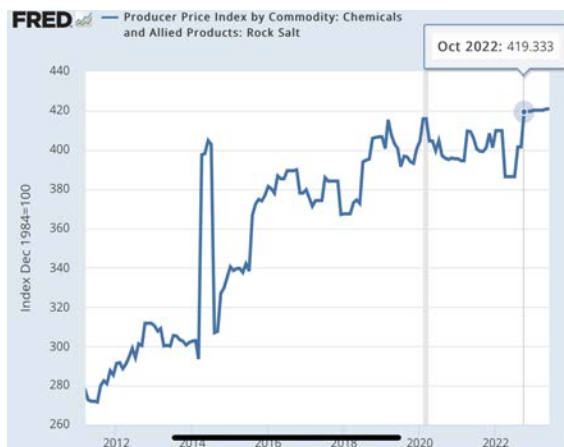
In this case these two food monopolies operated together as a cartel to use their dominance of the bread market to take more profits from consumers, businesses and, in particular, the most vulnerable. Regarding the findings of the investigation into this practice, Canada's Commissioner of Competition Matthew Boswell stated: "Fixing the price of bread, a food staple of Canadian households, was a serious criminal offence. Our continuing investigation remains a top priority. We are doing everything in our power to pursue those who engage in price-fixing."

Stone Canyon Industries' actions leading up to and during the strike they provoked at Windsor Salt in Windsor deserve investigation by those who are concerned about the manipulation of prices of important commodities to the detriment of the public and municipalities.

A reduction or shutdown of salt production at Stone Canyon's Windsor Salt mine and evaporation facility by a deliberately-provoked strike reduces the overall supply of salt from one mining operation. The reduced supply results in an increase in the price of rock salt and fine salt in a sector of the economy that is highly monopolized, benefitting Stone Canyon, as it can still fill its orders for the now higher priced salt from its other operations as well as its competitors, who are also favoured by the higher prices they can command due to the restricted supply.

Salt workers report that it is a common practice for companies in the salt business whose workers are on strike to purchase salt from competitors in order to keep their contracts with customers. They would, however, pay a premium for that salt.

There are only two major producers of rock salt in Canada: Stone Canyon, based in California, and Compass Minerals, based in Kansas. In the U.S., a third producer is Minnesota-based Cargill. The U.S. Bureau of Labour Statistics indicates that rock salt prices have been at an all time and steady high since October 2022, following a significant drop in prices in March of 2022.[2] Besides available supply, a major determinant for rock salt demand and its price is the severity of winter weather. For example, a milder winter in 2022-23 would have meant that municipalities that stockpiled salt would have left-over stock. Workers also note, for example, that the price for pool salt in places like Nova



[Click to enlarge](#)

Scotia is now \$40 a bag as compared to \$10 a bag in the past.

The only other major producer of fine salt in Canada besides Windsor Salt is Compass Minerals, which has evaporation facilities in Unity, Saskatchewan (160,000 tons); Goderich, Ontario (130,000 tons); and Amherst, Nova Scotia (130,000 tons). It also has operations in Lyons, Kansas (annual capacity of 450,000 tons). Stone Canyon meanwhile shut down its only other evaporation plant in Canada, in Lindbergh, Alberta, shortly after purchasing K+S Americas, the previous owners of Windsor Salt, in 2021. It is reportedly currently supplying fine salt to the Canadian market from its operations in Silver Springs, New York but may also be purchasing it from competitors and then packaging it as Windsor Salt.

Provoking a Strike

As negotiations between the company and the union began, the company signaled its intentions by tabling unacceptable demands for contracting out of union work and hired a notorious union-busting law firm from the U.S. It made it clear it would not negotiate anything but submission, something the workers could not accept. If the workers had submitted, Stone Canyon could have expropriated more of the value produced by the workers than they could under the old contract, through attacks on their working conditions and bringing non-union labour in to do their work.

This did not happen because the workers upheld their dignity and said *No!* When the workers did not submit voluntarily to these unacceptable demands and instead went on strike, it enabled the company, as well as its competitors, to benefit from reduced salt production, raising prices for this critical mineral, with the benefit to them only increasing the longer the strike goes on.

Stalling, Diversions and Provocations

Evidence that leads salt workers to consider that Stone Canyon has been deliberately prolonging the strike includes the fact that throughout the negotiations the company would walk away from the table, fabricating excuse after excuse why it couldn't or wouldn't negotiate. First, it was the tabling of demands that amounted to union-busting, which the company knew the union would not accept. Then, it allegedly couldn't negotiate because it needed a week to train managers in mine rescue so it could reopen the mine, something it then never did.

The company's threats provoked a response from striking workers that the company used to have them charged with violating a court-ordered injunction, and to ratchet up the tension and paint the workers as law-breakers. The company next used an alleged attack on one of its managers at the mine, for which no evidence has ever been presented, as the reason it had to break off negotiations with the union. When it eventually did resume negotiations, it would only do so via email, which meant all kinds of online back and forth that dragged negotiations out further. Even when talks were progressing with this method, when the union wanted to reconsider an important aspect of a company offer, Stone Canyon walked away from negotiations again, this time without even notifying the union and instead going right to the media.

Then, showing that it is indeed capable of negotiating in-person, but had chosen not to, the company agreed to show up for talks with a government-appointed mediator. However, it refused to give up its union-busting demands, something it is clear the workers are not in any mood to accept, as evidenced by the rejection of the tentative agreement by the miners at the Ojibway Mine on July 26.

A further indication that Stone Canyon does not want Windsor producing rock salt at full capacity includes the fact that in the tentative agreement production would only restart August 14, a full three and a half weeks after the tentative agreement was announced.

Clues Prior to the Strike

Reflecting on developments prior to the strike, workers note that since August 2022, the new U.S. owners changed their methods of dealing with the workers: going against the contract and then telling the union to just grieve any issues they had, which led to a pile-up of grievances that the company could then trade off during negotiations in return for concessions.

Workers also note that a day before the company presented its unacceptable demands that provoked the strike, workers off on sick leave were ordered back to work, meaning they would then be on strike and no longer eligible to receive 80 per cent of their wages through sick leave provisions in their contract. They also report that in one case a worker submitted a claim for health benefits two days before the strike was initiated and received notice that the benefits were denied shortly after the strike began. This indicates that cutting off benefits the day the strike began was set up in advance as benefits are typically paid by the company for the whole month in advance.

Workers also report that just prior to the strike, certain customers of Windsor Salt were told that they needed to get their salt immediately as there may not be salt when they need it later, which, if confirmed, also shows the company was aware its actions would lead to a strike.

Drawing Conclusions

This all leads the workers to believe that Stone Canyon, which took over Windsor Salt in April 2021, had been preparing to provoke a strike in Windsor for some time, rather than trying to build a positive and mutually beneficial atmosphere with the workers and their union.

The company has continued to mine and ship out rock salt from the Ojibway mine, albeit in lower quantities using management scabs, with the courts facilitating this through injunctions. Keeping the mine moving is important to avoid permanent damage to machines and infrastructure and the company cannot completely shut down its operation during the strike.

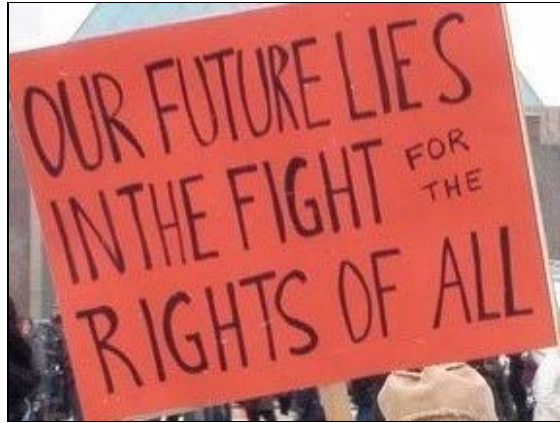
At the evaporation plant in Windsor, no production has taken place however, leaving machines and facilities harmed by the stoppage. The evaporation plant is a highly productive operation and its shutdown means that the North American supply of food and commercial grade salt is significantly reduced.

Early on in the strike, the company abandoned attempts to operate the machines at the evaporation plant, with the workers pointing out that it is likely because machines have been damaged by those trying to operate them and are out of commission. Instead of negotiating a deal with the workers' union to be able to resume production, Stone Canyon is filling at least some of its orders for fine salt from its operations in the U.S. Shortly after the start of the strike the company's packaging had been revised, removing the previous "Made in Canada" branding so they could import fine salt from outside Canada under the Windsor Salt brand.

Anti-Social Effects of Increased Salt Prices

If Stone Canyon is deliberately prolonging the strike to manipulate supply and demand and maintain a high price of salt that benefits them and their competitors to the detriment of the workers as well as the municipal and provincial governments and public services that rely on rock salt for the safety of roads and walkways this is a serious concern.

Increasing salt prices significantly gouges the public purse as municipalities are forced to pay more for road salt in contracts for future years. Or, in some cases, they can even have their orders cancelled -- despite being already accepted at the previous year's rate -- as the companies can get more for their product in a period when supply is low, demand is high, and the winter is rough. Elevated salt prices also increase the price of food and other basic living expenses, as salt is used for many purposes, including water softening and treatment of swimming pool water, not to mention its use in medical procedures and health care.



Governments that claim to be concerned with inflation as well as price gouging or fixing for essential resources should look into these insights from the workers and investigate if Stone Canyon is benefitting financially from restricting the supply of salt in order to raise prices by locking Canadian salt in the ground at the expense of the salt workers, municipal governments and all Canadians and refusing to negotiate with its workers in order to benefit itself and other salt monopolies at the expense of the Canadian economy and workers.

The Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan must also respond to its members' concerns that favourable returns on its investment in Stone Canyon due to a long strike raising salt prices at the expense of the workers and others are ill-gotten gains that cannot be tolerated.

Notes

1. "Bid-rigging, price-fixing and other agreements between competitors – Common types of illegal agreements that hinder competition," Competition Bureau of Canada.
2. "Producer Price Index by Commodity: Chemicals and Allied Products: Rock Salt," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, July 27, 2023



Is Stone Canyon Hiding Its "Leadership?"

A review of Stone Canyon Industries' website reveals that the page which outlined those who run the company is no longer online. Although a link called "Our Leadership" exists on its main page, it does not go anywhere. In the past the link went to an outline of the members of its Board of Managers as well as Advisors.

This information has been used to hold Managers, such as those from the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan who sit on the Board, to account for their role in overseeing Stone Canyon's operations as a major shareholder. It may be the case that their Leadership page is being revamped, or it may also be the case that they no longer want to be held to account for their actions and this is one way they are trying to hide. Whatever the case may be, Stone Canyon has a lot to account for.



Website: www.cpcml.ca Email: editor@cpcml.ca

