

Your mine, not mine

>> A controversial project is lining up
the citizens of Oka against a Montreal company

by **PATRICK LEJTENYI**

The small village of Oka, about 40 kilometres north-west of the city, is much more than your average sleepy hamlet. Perhaps most famous for the unpleasantness of the 1990 summer stand-off between armed Mohawk Warriors and the SQ and the army, the result of a proposed golf course extension over traditional native burial grounds, the town is again the centre of a controversial development project that has pitted both Mohawks of the nearby Kahnasatake reserve and the residents of Oka village against a Montreal-based mining company.

The mine in question will be digging for niobium, a rare metal used as a steel alloy to save on weight and thickness, which is more resistant to corrosion and is easier to weld. It is used mainly in cars, planes, bridges, computer chips, artificial body parts and in supercolliders, like the particle accelerator in Geneva, Switzerland. The company set up to exploit the deposit, Nlocan Inc., says it has developed a plan that is ecologically sound, takes the interests of the community seriously and will include the construction of a new water system for the surrounding homes.

The majority of locals are outraged. They say the mine's environmental assessment is sloppy at best, and glosses over the potentially disastrous effects the mine's operations would have on the community's health and agricultural production, worth an estimated \$14-million per year. And as for jobs, opponents say it wouldn't make any sense for Nlocan to hire untrained locals for a sophisticated job.

"Mining isn't a pick and shovel operation anymore," says the recently appointed Kahnasatake Grand Chief Steve Bonsplle. "There are lots of unemployed miners looking for work. [Nlocan's]

not going to spend a lot of money on training when someone else is trained to do the job."

But jobs aren't the primary issue locals are fighting over. Radiation is. They fear the mine's operation will unleash radon gas that's trapped in the rock, and ruin the crops that sustain the community's agricultural base.

RADIATION NATION

According to one expert, the levels of radon gas in the ground around Oka, already the highest in Canada, would become a major health hazard if the mine's current plans are put into effect. "Radon gas is encountered in uranium mining, and the ore body for niobium is in a uranium body," says Gordon Edwards, president of the Canadian Coalition for Nuclear Responsibility (CCNR) and a professor at Vanier College. He says radon, when inhaled in significant quantities, has been identified as deadly since the 1930s, and targets exposure to indoor radon as the second leading cause of lung cancer after smoking. "The rock itself generates radon gas and will continue to generate it for hundreds of thousands of years. If the rock is cut in half, it will create two new surfaces, and more radon gas will escape. And if the rock is crushed it will increase the radon release by 10,000 or 100,000 or a million times. The sand-like residue [from the mine's rock-crushing] is also a problem because it is still generating radon."

Although radon's half-life is short at only 3.8 days, it is eight times heavier than air and therefore stays close to the ground. Radon eventually breaks down into several isotopes, including lead 210, which in turn produces polonium 210. "Polonium 210 is considered even more toxic than plutonium," says Edwards. "If polonium is

released then you will have fall-out on your vegetables and in fish and meat. Polonium can be harvested in crops and will remain in food when it is sold in markets. Once polonium 210 gets into biological tissue, the tissue becomes a vehicle for delivery of polonium into your body."

Edwards also feels that Canada's lax safety standards regarding exposure to radiation gives Niocan the grounds for pressing ahead with the project. The Canadian limit for safe exposure to radiation levels stands at 800 Becquerels per litre. The American standard, however, is 150. Some of the homes near the proposed mine's site already have readings of over 800.

Edwards says there are "big glaring gaps" in Niocan's analysis of the problem of radioactivity. "Quebec has virtually no experience with this problem because of a lack of uranium in the province, which opens up serious concerns."

BRINGING MONEY, WATER AND JOBS

Niocan president Richard Faucher, however, feels that far too much is being made about what he feels is an extensively researched and ultimately safe and mutually profitable venture. "The opponents are politically motivated," he says. "We estimate that the mine will affect wells sunk into the rock up to one kilometre on each side of the mine, but we are bringing in a potable water system for residents. That's better quality water. No one will be affected by the mine except by construction equipment along Ste-Sophie road."

Faucher says the project will bring in a lot for locals. A Fall 2000 newsletter, forwarded to the *Mirror* by Faucher, lists the advantages: "Funding of a \$1-million job training program during the construction phase to help local residents qualify for the mine's high-paying jobs; 160 permanent, stable, safe and well-paid positions; 150-200 construction jobs for a period of two years; over 200 indirect jobs sustained over the life of the mine; job opportunities for the area's youth; [and] opportunities to find jobs close to home and family." Niocan documents say it would become the largest employer in the

region, employing 610 construction jobs over 18 months at significantly higher wages than average, and 340 jobs from the mine's annual operations, also at higher than average wages. Furthermore, the newsletter says the mine will stimulate the economy, favouring local suppliers, participate in the tourist economy and increase the value of real estate. The six-hectare site would be returned to the municipality for a nominal one-dollar fee at the end of the mine's 17-year life.

But getting back to the question of radioactivity and waste disposal, Faucher says again that local opponents are worrying for nothing. "We will return the waste underground in a safer condition than when it was extracted," he says. "We'll separate the ferro-nickel between slag and metal and recycle the slag underground. It will be no more, no less radioactive when it returns in a volcanic rock. It will then be melted and frozen, making it more impermeable in this state than it was originally."

Faucher acknowledges citizens' concerns, but says, "People can be scared, but we have to keep it in perspective." He is hoping to start construction by the summer of 2002.

LAW AND ORDERS

But not if André Chaput has anything to do with it. For four years, Chaput has been president of the citizens' committee opposed to the mine, and has been lobbying provincial ministers to block the project. Chaput's fight has now become personal as well. In January 2000, Niocan lawyers served Chaput with a cease and desist order relate to an anti-Niocan Web site (and there are several), claiming it contained factual errors. Chaput, however, insists he had nothing to do with the site, and the corrections he was forced to publish in a local newspaper damaged his reputation. He sued for defamation, and lost, last September. He had to pay \$750 in court costs, but has no plans to back down.

"We were against it and are still against it," he says. "Not only us on the committee, but the people of Oka. We had a referendum in April 2000, and Oka parish rejected it by 62 per cent." Niocan claims the residents of Oka village, however, a different political entity at the time, supported the project overwhelmingly, with 92 per cent in favour. But Bonsplie says the question on the village's ballot was vague and leading, and did not directly relate to the project in question.

Complicating things further was the merger of the town and parish in the spring of 2000. The mayor of the new municipality (and former parish mayor), Yvan Patry, is said to have initially favoured the project, but, faced with residents' widespread disaffection, has since spoken out against it. Patry did not return the *Mirror's* repeated attempts to contact him.

Meanwhile, Chaput and his committee, along with Bonsplie and others, are presenting their case before an administrative tribunal to decide whether Niocan will receive the proper zoning permits to begin construction of the mine. They had hearings in November, and will continue in the spring. Edwards will return before the tribunal again, as will a geomorphologist and a geologist to provide expert testimony. Louis Sylvestre, the committee's lawyer, says they will fight to the end. "My mandate is quite clear," he says. "We want to block this project. There is no compromise. It is absolutely incompatible for a mining project to open up in the middle of a field where there is agricultural cultivation."

Money, however, is a problem. Bonsplie says the band council has had to shelve several other projects to pursue this one, but he won't take a defeat lying down. "We're going to pursue all avenues," he says. "If we exhaust the legal avenues, we'll find avenues of protests, like demonstrations, slowing down traffic, and symbolic blockades." ☉

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