

Let me say this about that

—By Gene Klare



George Brown, a legend

GEORGE BROWN, a legendary lobbyist and political strategist for the Oregon labor movement, gets the spotlight in this edition as a new member of the Labor Honor Roll, which the Northwest Labor Press started to salute labor stalwarts of bygone years.

The Labor Honor Roll provides recognition to men and women of the past who are not eligible for the Labor Hall of Fame sponsored by the Northwest Oregon Labor Retirees Council because the Hall of Fame was established to honor retired unionists while they are still living.



GEORGE BROWN

BROWN SERVED the Oregon AFL-CIO as its elected director of political education and legislation from the 1956 merger of the state councils of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations until his retirement in 1969. Prior to the merger, Brown was the executive secretary-treasurer of the Oregon CIO State Council, a post he was first elected to in 1949. That year he took over the the state leadership of the CIO from Stanley Earl, who left to undertake an assignment in Korea for the United States Government. Upon Earl's return from Korea, he was

elected as a Portland city commissioner in 1952 and continued at City Hall until his death in 1970.

BROWN AND EARL had started working together at the old Multnomah Plywood Co. sawmill in 1934; Earl became president with Brown as vice president of the AFL Lumber and Sawmill Workers local union at the mill. Later, because of dissatisfaction with their union's national leadership in the big 1935 strike to organize the Northwest lumber industry, Brown and Earl broke away and helped form the International Woodworkers of America as a CIO union. Brown became an IWA organizer, achieving his first big success in Longview, Washington. In a series of bargaining rights elections there, the IWA got 5,000 members in two days. That had a two-fold significance: It was the key to organizing the rest of the industry in the Northwest, and it provided the votes needed within the union to oust Communist-leaning leaders.

FOR 14 YEARS, Brown dedicated his energies to the rough-and-tumble job of organizing logging and sawmill workers. He spent some of his organizing years in the South, where he insisted that the locals he organized be racially integrated. Brown did some of his organizing in Oklahoma, where he was born on Nov. 6, 1902, which was five years before it became the nation's 46th state. While trying to organize a sawmill in a small Oklahoma town, Brown was alerted by some of the mill's workers that the bosses and their goons were planning to tar-and-feather him and chase him out of town. Forewarned, Brown left before the gang got ready to look for him.

Brown, who eventually became the IWA's director of organizing, did extensive organizing in Canada. When he left the IWA job in 1949 to head up the State CIO Council, the Portland-headquartered IWA had grown from a membership of 15,000 to 150,000.

IN THE YEARS prior to the 1956 merger of the AFL and CIO, Brown and his AFL counterpart James T. Marr (profiled in the last issue), cooperated on politics and legislation so they could be more effective in representing workers' interests. That cooperation reaped rewards, as was noted in the Marr article, in the mid-1950s elections of Democrats to federal and state offices.

Over the years, George Brown put in countless hours as a spokesman for organized labor and a representative of workers' interests while serving on governmental and civic boards, commissions and committees. Among his major contributions was service on a committee appointed by Portland Mayor Terry D. Schunk that eventually saw the formation of the TriMet Transit System as a public agency which replaced a privately-owned bus line.

(Continued in Next Issue)

Providence bosses frown on state official's role on 'Fair Elections' panel

After Oregon Secretary of State Bill Bradbury agreed to look at the union election rights of workers at Providence Health Systems, he got a pair of threat letters from Providence and its industry association.

Service Employees International Union Local 49 has been engaged in a massive organizing campaign at several Providence hospitals in the Portland area for over a year, but the union has been hesitant to file for a union election unless Providence commits to a set of ground rules. In campaigns in other states, Providence — a Catholic-owned nonprofit health system — has used legal avenues under the National Labor Relations Act to mount vigorous anti-union campaigns that sometimes slow or defeat union drives.

Bradbury had agreed to chair a May 25 hearing of a "Fair Election Oversight Commission," made up of members of the activist group Jobs with Justice's Workers Rights Board. The Board is comprised of religious, political and community leaders who agree to use their moral authority to advocate for workers' rights, usually with letters to employers and sometimes in unofficial but quasi-judicial "hearings" that result in recommendations for neutrality.

As secretary of state, it's Bradbury's duty to ensure free and fair elections for public office.

But intervening in a union election was going too far, said Providence CEO Russ Danielson.

"Your decision to insert the office of

secretary of state into a private organization's labor issues is both perplexing and disturbing," Danielson wrote in a May 17 letter to Bradbury. "There simply is no merit, precedent, or legal foundation for your attempts to use your office as a vehicle for attempting to legislate the union and labor issues of a private company."

"It would be ineffective and legally questionable to attend the meeting of a commission that — by law

— should not exist. We officially request that you disband this commission.... My belief is that responsible Oregonians would strongly encourage you to refocus your energies (and the taxpayer's dollars) on the official duties prescribed to you as Oregon's secretary of state."

CEO Andrew Davidson, president of the Oregon Association of Hospitals and Health Systems, sent a similar letter the same day, inquiring about what statutory authority Bradbury had to convene such a meeting. The letters can be viewed in their entirety on the Northwest Labor Press Web site at www.nwlabornpress.org/2006/6-2-06WRB.html

"They vaguely threatened, without directly saying it, that I've broken the

law," Bradbury said. "If that's their response to me, a statewide elected leader, it makes me wonder what it's going to be like for the workers who want to form a union."

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Undeterred, Bradbury went ahead with the hearing, and in a phone call to Danielson and a letter to the hospital association, explained why: Democratic principles are not limited to elections for public office. Just as he advocates for democratic principles

when he meets with foreign dignitaries, Bradbury said, he encourages public support for the right of Providence workers for a free and fair election.

The hearing at the Portland Building was packed wall-to-wall with Providence workers, union leaders and pro-labor activists. SEIU brought Providence workers from New York, California, and Yakima, Wash., to testify along with workers from the Portland area. There was a note-taker, and simultaneous translation into Russian and Spanish.

"NLRB [National Labor Relations Board union certification] elections look more like the discredited practices of rogue regimes abroad than like anything we would call American," testified

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