

# After 32-year career, Pronovost retires from UFCW #555

Gene Pronovost has seen and experienced a lot as a labor leader in Oregon. But after 32 years in the business, he decided not to run for a fifth term as president of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 555 — the state's largest private-sector union, with about 18,500 members.

Pronovost's term doesn't officially expire until the end of the year, but to help ease the transition of a new team of elected leaders, he agreed to step down early. His last day was Nov. 6.

"I'm retiring at a time when labor might have some renewed hope," Pronovost said. "For the last eight years, labor has been under constant attack by the Bush Administration. I think things might start turning around (with the election of Barack Obama as president). At least I hope they do."

In the course of his career, Pronovost, 55, has worked in many facets of the trade — starting out as a rank-and-file member of Retail Clerks Local 1092 working as a boxboy and grocery clerk. He was an elected union rep, a hired union rep for both public and private-sector unions, and he served stints as grievance director, membership services director, and executive assistant to the president at Local 555.

In 1996, he reached the pinnacle of his career as president of Local 555, a post he held for four terms — the

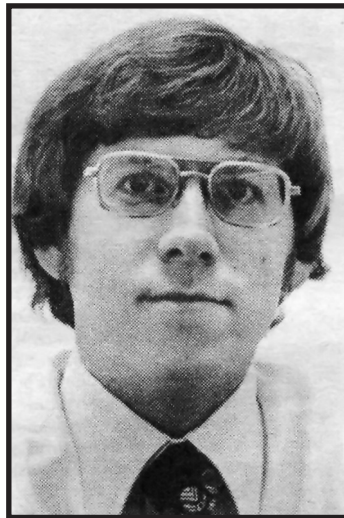
longest reign in the union's history. Along his journey, Pronovost helped bargain contracts that improved the lives of thousands of union workers. His involvement as chief co-sponsor of a 2002 ballot measure also resulted in wage increases for thousands of Oregon's lowest-paid workers — people with no ties to organized labor. Voters passed Measure 25, raising the state's minimum wage and indexing it to inflation so that to this day, when costs go up, workers get a wage adjustment to match it.

"That was probably one of my most satisfying accomplishments," he said.

But he's also very proud of a bill the union helped pass last year in the Oregon Legislature that allows workers who have been locked out by their employers during a multi-employer labor dispute to file for unemployment insurance.

"I fought a long time to get that bill through," Pronovost said. "It was one of my goals before I retired."

Asked if he had any regrets, or would like a "do over," Pronovost said he couldn't think of anything. Certainly he would like to have organized a Wal-mart store, something the international union has been trying to do in the United States for decades. He is confident, however, that if the Employee Free Choice Act is passed into



At age 24, Gene Pronovost was one of the youngest delegates to attend the 1977 Oregon AFL-CIO convention.

law, some Wal-mart stores will unionize. "They can't close all their stores," he said, referring to a store the company closed in Canada shortly after workers voted for the union.

He might also covet a second shot at being president of Retail Clerks Local 1092. In 1983, he ran unsuccessfully against incumbent Mike Hereford. Shortly after the defeat, he went to work for Oregon AFSCME Council 75, assigned as a union rep to Mult-



Gene Pronovost at a 2002 press conference announcing the filing of an initiative petition to increase the state's minimum wage and provide annual cost-of-living adjustments. Only six of 12 measures on the statewide ballot were approved by voters that year — Measure 25 was one of the six.

nomah County Employees Local 88.

Four years later he returned to the grocery union to work for then-President Ken MacKillop. In 1985, Oregon's retail, grocery, and meatcutter locals merged to create UFCW Local 555. In 1987, MacKillop defeated Hereford in an election mandated by the merger.

MacKillop retired in 1996 and members elected Pronovost as his successor. He was re-elected by wide margins or by acclamation for three more consecutive terms.

Pronovost believes a large part of his success and sustainability came from surrounding himself with quality staff and stewards. "We tried to always stay positive and loyal to our membership," he said.

Pronovost learned his labor philosophy from his parents, who were activists both politically and at work. His father was a postal clerk at a time when government employees weren't allowed to have a union.

"That doesn't mean they weren't organized," Pronovost said. "I remember going to meetings with my mom (who was with the women's auxiliary) and dad to plan political events or for something going on at work. They were very involved."

A native of Portland, Pronovost graduated from David Douglas High School in Northeast Portland and attended the University of Oregon for two years.

As many students do, he worked part-time as a box boy and grocery clerk. It was while working as a clerk at Ernie's Thriftway in Beaverton that he met Lon Imel and Nellie Fox. Both were reps for the Retail Clerks Union and regular customers at the store.

"It was a highly energized union store," Pronovost recalled.

That energy apparently rubbed off. In December 1976, at age 23, Pronovost ran for and was elected a union rep at Local 1092. He jumped

right in, helping to create the first shop stewards program at the local. [In 1999, in his second term as president of Local 555, Pronovost launched the first steward summit to recognize the hard work done by shop stewards.]

In 1977, Pronovost was a delegate at his first Oregon AFL-CIO convention. In an interview with the Labor Press featuring young union members, Pronovost said that he would like to see the AFL-CIO devote more energy toward setting organizing targets and helping organize nonunion workers.

"I think the labor movement is going to have to change. You can't stay as you are," he said in the 1977 interview. "The labor movement has to be educated in economics and law. It's not like the old days where it was power politics. Now you have to justify everything."

Pronovost clung to that philosophy throughout his career. As president he established an aggressive organizing department at Local 555, and created a political action program to keep members informed about issues that impacted their jobs. He also stayed active in other organizations, serving as president of the Portland Provision Trades Council; as a vice president of the Oregon AFL-CIO; on the Executive Board of the Northwest Oregon Labor Council; as chair of the Oregon Labor Press Publishing Co. board of directors; as chair of the Oregon Wage and Hour Commission; on the advisory committee of the Labor Education and Research Center at the University of Oregon; on Labor's Community Services Agency board of directors; on the Oregon Employment Advisory Council, as well as a trustee on several union pension and health care trusts.

In 2001, he was appointed to the international union's Executive Board — the first UFCW labor leader from Oregon to ever hold a seat on the board. He will serve in that capacity until Dec. 31.

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