

EXIT INTERVIEW

5 questions for Oregon AFSCME's Ken Allen

By Don McIntosh
Associate editor

One of Oregon's best-known labor leaders, Ken Allen, is retiring July 31. Allen, 62, is executive director of 25,000-member Oregon AFSCME (the statewide council for the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees). An Oregon native, he began his 42-year-career in the labor movement with a stint at the United Farm Workers in Massachusetts. In the 1970s and '80s, he worked for unions in Massachusetts and Oregon, including the hospital workers union known as 1199; United Electrical Workers (where he was an underground union organizer and staff rep); Oregon State Employees Association (later SEIU Local 503); and AFSCME. He went to work for AFSCME permanently in 1987, as a union rep, and became executive director in 1995. Under his leadership, Oregon AFSCME added about 10,000 members. Over the years, he led many contract negotiations for state employees, instigated pioneering union organizing efforts among family child care providers, and helped put together the Fair Shot Coalition that won paid sick leave and other victories in Oregon. In retirement, he'll continue to serve as a governor-appointed mem-

ber of the board of directors of Oregon Health and Science University. I interviewed him June 6 in a temporary underground office at Oregon AFSCME headquarters.

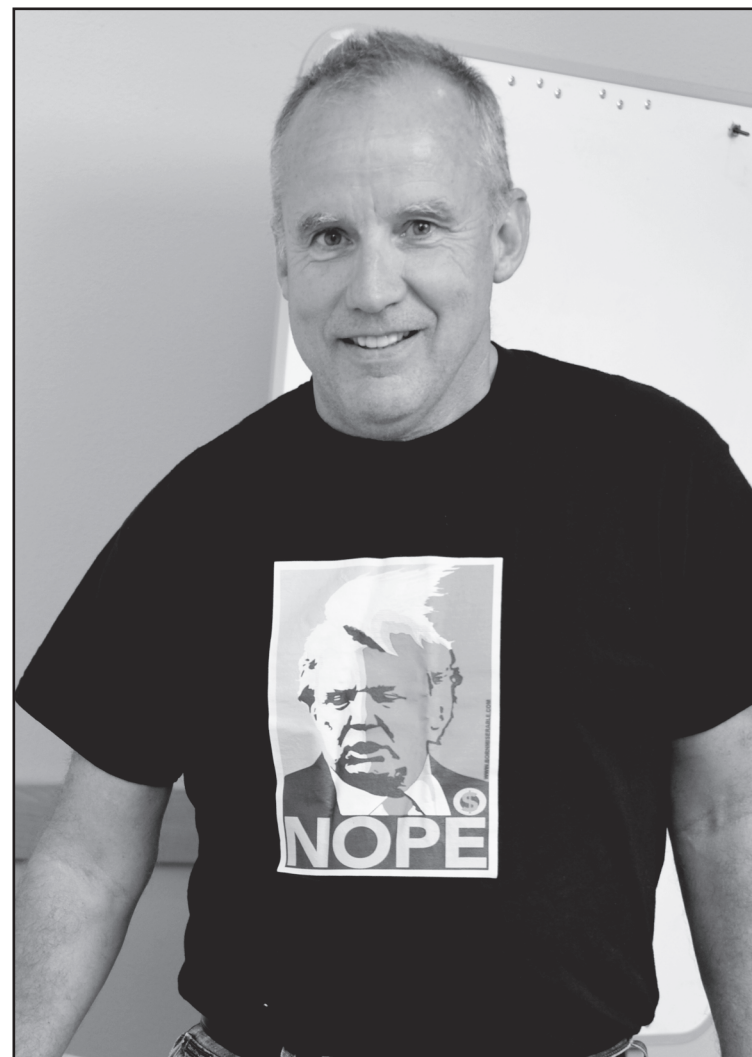
How did you get started in the labor movement? I grew up in Salem, Oregon, so I worked picking strawberries and beans when I was a kid. At University of Massachusetts Amherst, I hooked up with the United Farm Workers grape and lettuce boycott in 1973. I had seen the conditions that migrant farmworkers worked under in the Salem area, so I dropped out of college to work full-time on the boycott. My piece was organizing trade union support of the boycott in Western Massachusetts, because I came from a union family. My dad and grandparents were IWA out of Coos Bay, and my dad was AWPPW in Salem. He was a lumber mill worker, then a paper mill worker. I walked picket lines when I was five years old with my dad. Then AWPPW struck when I was a teenager, and Dad's best friend scabbed. It was actually a family that we socialized with. And we never saw that family again. He never talked to that scab again. So there were some life lessons.

What's it like to become the old guard? I first became aware of it in 2004 when we were

challenged in the first Public Employee Retirement System (PERS) lawsuit. I was the old-timer that knew about the PERS tradeoff that happened in 1979 to 1981, when the union workers traded some wage increases for the 6 percent pickup [*In lieu of raises, the employer picked up the required employee pension contribution.*] For the old guard, there's a time to turn things over to a younger group, and people should recognize that instead of just trying to hang on. I probably haven't lost skill in negotiations, but I've done some 100-hour work weeks, and I can't do those any more.

What's the biggest myth some members of the public have about public employees? Public workers work just as hard as private sector workers. It's bullshit to think they don't. I've represented them both in my lifetime. Public service workers are dedicated to their work and they work just as hard as private sector workers.

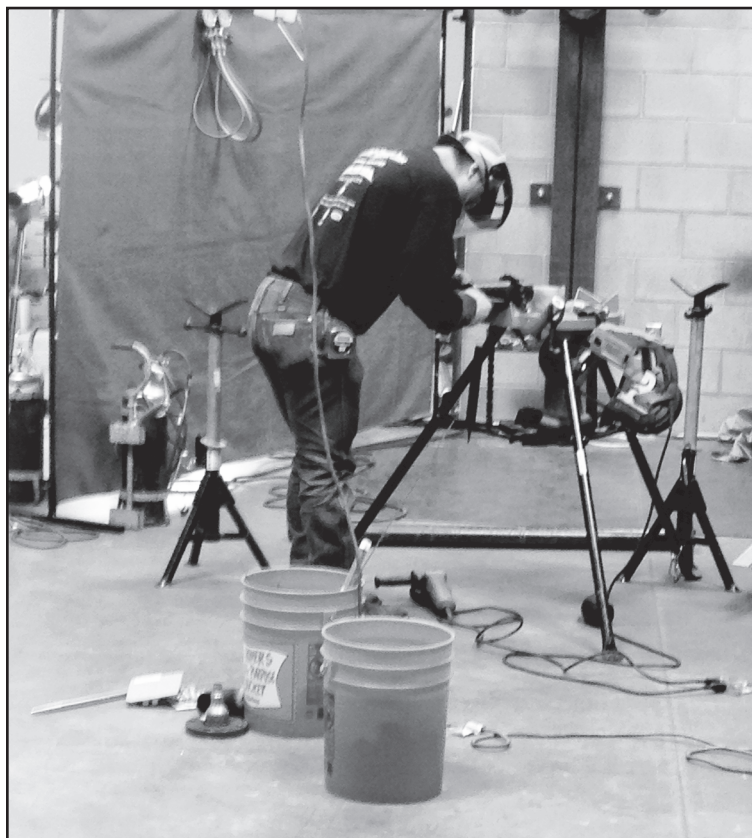
What advice do you have for other union leaders? I think it's important for people at my level, directors, to continue to be directly involved in organizing and first contract campaigns, because it keeps the fire in your belly. There's nothing more important than having that fire in



your belly, and you get that from workers who don't have a union. You find out how shitty it is, and then you do the work to get that first contract and improve their lives, and see leaders develop. That's what's rewarding about the work.

Why do you think public employees need union represen-

tation? I think all workers need union representation. The wealthy and the CEOs, the corporate elite, are getting greedier and are treating workers worse and worse. I'm not surprised by the 15 Now movement. I think labor's going to be on the upswing so long as people are willing to be creative and try to organize in different ways.



Local 290 steamfitter apprentice Dallas Crone prepares a 3-inch carbon steel pipe for a saddle during regional apprenticeship contest June 22 at the A&J Training Center in Van Nuys, California. Crone won the competition, and will represent Local 290 at the national finals in Ann Arbor, Michigan in August.

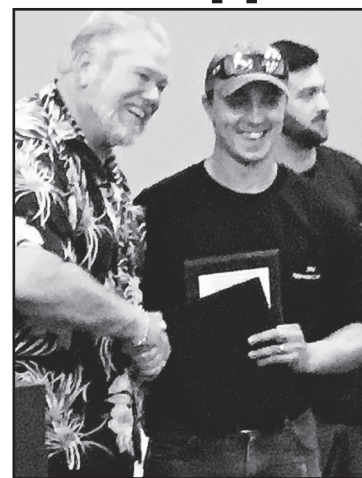
PRIDE ON THE JOB

UA Local 290's Dallas Crone takes first at regional steamfitter apprentice contest

Dallas Crone, a 10th-term apprentice steamfitter at United Association of Plumbers and Fitters Local 290, captured first place at the District 5 Regional Apprenticeship Competition held June 22-23 at A&J Training Center in Van Nuys, California. District 5 encompasses 12 western states, including Oregon and Washington.

Crone, who works for J.H. Kelley, qualified for the regional competition by winning the Oregon State Apprenticeship Contest held in April at Local 290's training center in Tualatin. He now moves on to the national finals Aug. 13-18 in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

The competition is comprised of hands-on challenges that include pipe threading, pipe bend-



Local 290 steamfitter apprentice Dallas Crone gets a handshake and bragging rights after winning a regional competition in California.

ing, soldering/ brazing, fabrication, and a written test. Contestants are judged on efficiency, accuracy and final product.

In addition to steamfitting, the apprentice competition has categories for plumbing, welding, and HVAC/R (heating, ventilation, air conditioning and refrigeration). Representing Local 290 in those disciplines in Van Nuys were Oregon winners Alex Kuenzi (HVAC/R); Kevin Kuborn (plumbing); and Jordan Alwert (welding).

"We have a group of apprentices that look very promising. We are very proud of all of them," said assistant apprenticeship coordinator Justin May.

Local 290 currently is training 400 apprentices.

[*Editor's Note: Since the regional competition, Crone turned out and is now a journeyman. Under contest rules, he is still eligible to compete at the national finals.*]