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news BY ALAN PITTMAN

Aborted Police Chief

What the failed search says about the EPD and its union.

Eugene's failed search for a new police chief may reveal more about the city's police union than the candidates.

After the city named George Aylward of Minneapolis as its top candidate last month, Aylward withdrew in the face of opposition from Eugene's powerful police union. Publicly, Aylward cited family reasons for bowing out, but union officials told local media that Aylward was the subject of four no-confidence votes by the police union when he was chief in Middletown, Conn., and questioned his competence to serve as Eugene's police chief. Aylward did not return a call from *EW*.

"I've heard by the grapevine that local police are gloating," says neighborhood activist Majeska Seese-Green. But Seese-Green says the police union opposition reveals more about the local police than Aylward. "Aylward might be considered 'incompetent' by someone whose competence in truly understanding community policing leaves something to be desired."

Aylward was the target of union opposition in Middletown, but it's hard to tell whether Aylward's clashes with the union weren't in fact serving the community's best interests.

A 1995 incident in which Aylward fired an officer accused of racism in arresting four black college students fueled union ire. The incident sparked protest rallies and town meetings against police racism, but the union steadfastly defended the white officer, the *Hartford Courant* reported. Aylward ordered all his officers to undergo racial sensitivity training and fired the officer for intentionally arresting the students without cause and then lying to his superiors. The officer and union appealed and an independent arbitrator ruled the punishment was too severe and forced Aylward to re-hire the officer. The city settled a lawsuit with the black students for an undisclosed sum.

Middletown police union officials attacked Aylward again in 1996 after he suspended a police officer for a threatening union memo he wrote. The officer wrote that a Wesleyan University student rally in support of Mumia Abu Jamal, a black man sentenced to death for the killing of a Philadelphia police officer, was offensive and that officers should "remember this the next time you deal with persons associated with this so-called Univ[ersity]," the *Courant* reported. The officer later apologized to the university President. But union officials backed the officer and blasted Aylward for not supporting the officer and police after the union memo sparked large student protests against police intimidation. "The chief has taken on a clear adversarial role in dealing with our union," officers complained in a letter quoted by the *Courant*.

Eugene has also had protests in support of Mumia, who supporters say was framed. A

few years ago, protesters complained Eugene police used heavy-handed tactics against Mumia marchers.

In 1995, Aylward responded to his third no-confidence vote. "They [union officials] are not going to run the police department. I will try to keep control. If that means there is a vote of no confidence every month, then there will be a vote of no confidence every month," he told the *Courant*.

The Eugene union's role in apparently vetoing the new chief has left some in the community wondering who's in control of the police department and city. "There's a pretty wide-spread feeling in Eugene that EPD is out of control," Seese-Green says, citing complaints in Whiteaker about a recent SWAT raid that used an armored vehicle and dozens of officers in a failed search for marijuana.

Seese-Green, who sat on a committee that helped interview Aylward in closed meetings, says she had hoped Aylward could help reform the department.

But the Eugene police union has withstood reform attempts in the past. The last chief Eugene hired from outside the department was forced out after union criticism and widespread community complaints of excessive force. In a 1996 letter to the city manager, the Eugene police union outlined their opposition to Chief Leonard Cooke's efforts to increase community policing, start rotating detectives to patrol duties, control labor costs and tighten police discipline. Cooke testified a few years earlier in a labor dispute that he was amazed at the "loose" discipline in the department. "Frankly, I was sorta stunned that for some kinds of incidents discipline had not been administered and, in some cases, the kind of discipline that was administered, I couldn't believe."

After Cooke left, the Eugene union then played a major role in ousting City Manager Vicki Elmer who angered police by asking for a state police investigation into use of excessive force and pepper spray against tree sitters.

The Eugene police union routinely commands top pay raises. Over the past eight years, the city gave police officers raises of 7.7 percent over inflation while raises for city AFSCME union employees just kept pace with inflation.

While Aylward won opposition from police union officials here and in Connecticut, a *Courant* editorial praised his work for community policing when he left. "He has given Middletown 15 years of solid, professional management."

Activist Seese-Green says she hopes the Eugene community will become more involved in hiring its next chief. "People and organizations who aren't happy with EPD being 'out of control' — or who aren't happy with the police association being 'in control' of the [chief] hiring — need to let it be known."

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