Chrest: 'Vast majority, honest, hard working'

State Rep. Jim Chrest believes there is a danger of all employes of the Oregon Liquor Control Commission (OLCC) being unfairly tarred by allegations of abuses of power by agency officials.

"The vast, vast majority are honest, hard working and sincere," the Portland Democrat told The OSEA News. "It is a small handful that has contempt for law and the people they deal with. They have no concept of constitutional rights. They sit in their office glorying in all the power they have and they don't know how to use it (in a lawful way)."

Chrest describes himself as a frequent critic of the OLCC. However, he makes a distinction between those working in the field and the policy-makers, decision-makers and administrators. Indeed, it was because Chrest was contacted by a group of OLCC employes who were "tired of people being 'screwed'" by the agency that he has taken such an interest in the recent investigation underway by the Attorney General's office. (A press conference to announce the findings of the investigation was expected as The OSEA News was going to press.) Chrest called for an investigation of the OLCC during the 1977 legislative session but that got nowhere.

However, things turned out differently this fall. In November Chrest was contacted by a Portland weekly newspaper which asked him if he was aware that he had been investigated by the OLCC. His answer at that time was "No" coupled with surprise and indignation. After the story broke in the newspaper, the investigation of the OLCC by the Justice Department began.

Chrest says he is aware of the damage to morale that the investigation, the reports in the papers and on television and radio and suspicion are causing. He went on to say any employe has a loyalty to his firm or agency, no matter how critical he may be of its practices.

That's the point, according to Chrest. There is no mechanism within the OLCC for the loyal employe to report abuses, and there have been many as newspaper reports have shown and the attorney general's report is likely to show.

"Personnel problems are deep and severe," says Chrest. "It's shameful the way the OLCC administration has functioned. There is no process in reality for an employe to come forward and make his concerns known."

Chrest makes note of a letter from OLCC administrator Ken Underdahl to a liquor control officer that he would be fired because he cooperated with the attorney general's investigation.

"All that was is a warning to state employes to keep their mouth shut or be fired," Chrest said.

Chrest believes there should be a break up in the power of the OLCC. Presently, it's "judge, jury, policeman and executioner," he says, though he doesn't believe the state should get out of the liquor business, fearing inroads by organized crime among other things. But he objects to the OLCC concerning itself with health regulations, for example, when there is a county health officer around. He's offended by the temerity it has shown by telling a restaurant or tavern owner whether he can knock out a wall to expand his premises.

Chrest expects a legislative task force to look into ways the structure of the agency might be changed to prevent further abuses of power. He's quick to point out that the legislative task force, which he believes may be appointed in April or July, will not try to determine the guilt or innocence of any individuals but rather to introduce legislation to change the process based on the AG's report and public hearings. The task force may be one of the "sunset task forces" that will look at many state agencies under the state's Sunset Law.

Chrest, a vice president of Local 10 of the Longshoremen's Union, also takes issue with an OLCC order to investigate alleged gay activity in certain bars. It's not against the law to be gay, he noted, and city, county and state police have no authority to investigate gay activity. "Where the hell does the OLCC get off thinking they do?"

the OSEA news

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Miners' pact ignores mine safety issues

By BENTLEY GILBERT
Publications Director

As this is being written (Feb. 28) there is no assurance whatever that the agreement between the United Mine Workers (UMW) and the coal operators will be ratified by the rank and file.

As the nation's longest coal strike goes through its 85th day, the UMW leadership is beginning its selling campaign and the odds remain long whether the miners will buy it. Already, one local has turned down a similar, separate agreement with an independent coal operator. That agreement still may be ratified, of course, as the returns from the other locals come in.

Most of the popular media has dealt primarily with the wage increase. The maximum raise would be $2.40 an hour for miners who now average $7.80. That is not an issue with the miners, though it's questionable whether even that represents the miners' fair share of the huge profits the coal operators get nor whether it's adequate remuneration for the danger and unpleasantness of going down in a mine.

In fact, it's not, and that leads us to one of the real bones of contention in the dispute -- wildcat strikes.

We all know that the only way a working man or woman has to really have his grievances recognized in the face of repeated management inaction is to withhold his or her labor. That is what the wildcat strike issue is all about.

There has been some improvement in the safety conditions in the mines in recent years. In part due to the federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act, there were 141 miners killed last year, the same as the year before. Since the turn of the century, there have been over 100,000 mine fatalities or 1,300 per year.

This does not speak to the countless disabling injuries from roof falls or equipment, black lung from coal dust and arthritis from the ever-present water in the mines. The coal industry's rate of fatal and disabling injuries still is more than four times that of any other industry.

Thus we have the union's slogan enforced by these rank and file strikes: "Coal will be mined safely, or it will not be mined at all."

All the good federal laws and union contract clauses are not worth a thing unless they are enforced. Needless to say, the companies are not concerned about miner safety, except as it relates to lost production. And enforcement by the federal government and the union has proven ineffective. So enforcement is left up to the rank and file, those who actually must go down in the mines.

What does the new agreement say about all of this?

It says that miners who lead wildcat strikes, as well as those walking picket lines can be disciplined with penalties including loss of job. However, miners who honor wildcat picket lines are not subject to discipline.

In other words, if you and your fellow miners refuse to work in an unsafe mine, all will lose your jobs. It's as simple as that.

Also, miners who are guilty of repeated unauthorized absences will be subject to an "absenteeism control program," which can ultimately lead to loss of job. Miner absenteeism, which at 12 percent a day is the highest of any industry, is high because of the fatal and disabling injuries and because the companies work many miners a mandatory six days a week and push overtime.

You see where the companies are coming from. Since the federal government began its ill-conceived energy independence program with a strong reliance on coal, the operators have found that there is much money to be made, and now they've got the right to wring the last ounce of work out of the miners or show them the door.

The health package in this agreement takes a step back for every step forward. Miners now are required to pay a deductable up to $700 per family for health care that had been free. Even retired miners now must pay the deductable up to $450. On top of that, many of the miners will be moved from the independently-administered health plan to company-run ones. Shades of the infamous company store!

During the course of this long strike one of the two pension and health funds, the older one, ran out of money. Some pensioners and disabled miners received no checks. These were the men who built the union.

This first health and pension fund came as a result of a contract in 1954. And it always has had smaller benefits than the one which affects miners who retired after Jan. 1, 1976. That will continue.

The older fund could be strengthened and the benefits improved if the two funds were combined, but that now is up to management and it will take strong pressure from the miners to make that come to pass.

Still, the coal industry is booming. The value of coal mined per worker, per year rose from almost $11,000 to over $61,000 in the past 11 years. In 1969, 59 cents out of every dollar from coal sales went to miners' wages and benefits; in 1977, only 36 cents did.

Producing coal is good business. One independent producer made only 53 percent of its total sales in coal, but 91 percent of its total profits.

Most coal producers are not independents. Since the mid-1960s, multinational giants in oil, minerals, steels and electric power have gobbled up nearly every large coal company. Of the 25 companies holding the most coal reserves, 11 are oil and fuel companies; the other 14 include five mineral or steel companies, three railroads, two power companies, one electric company and only three independents.

An era may have passed if this agreement is ratified. The safety, health and lives of America's miners have been sacrificed to the bosses' greed for profits. The workers understand. The United Auto Workers, who were laid off when assembly lines had to be shut down because, without coal, the steel mills weren't producing, supported the miners' strike.

It's a little frightening. All the collective pressure of industry and the federal government was brought to bear on a group of men who simply want some relief from the certainty that in their young old age they won't walk but a few steps without stopping to catch their breath from black lung or in some other way losing their health -- or life.

'Coal will be mined safely, or it will not be mined at all.'