WHAT GOES ON WOULD AMAZE YOU!

AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVE REAVIS, CHAIRMAN OF THE LAWRENCE POLICE OFFICERS ASSOCIATION

PN: How long has there been a serious problem between the City and the Lawrence Police?

R: Many years. Ten, fifteen years. This is a low-wage town and the City's kept the City employes' wages down for years.

PN: Why have they done this?

R: If our wages go up equal to what the private sector pays then big business is threatened. The Chamber of Commerce is behind this. We had a woman call the Chamber to get their position on the Police-Fire dispute and they were very hostile to her...The Chamber brags about low wages here to encourage industry to come into Lawrence.

PN: Was there any public pressure involved in the City's decision to re-open talks?

R: I'm sure there was. The Governor at one time called the Mayor and told her to get off her can and stop using the Highway Patrol. There was a lot of other public opinion that finally made its way to the City.

PN: Why did the Police agree to go back to the negotiating table when the City stated that they would not talk about wages?

R: Just to be able to start talking again...Now, though, the membership wants more than is being offered. There's no substance to the '78. You don't realize anything until '79.

PN: How many officers have less than six years and would not benefit at all from the longevity plan?

R: Fifteen or twenty.

PN: Are low wages and the lack of a clear negotiating process the main problems?

R: Yes. We are not competitive. We do lose officers mainly to Johnson County, the Highway Patrol, the KBI...Olathe, Overland Park, Kansas City, Mo...

PN: What's the turnover rate for the Police?

R: There were two surveys...Our survey came out with 15 per cent, the City's with 17 per cent. That's an improvement. In the early '70s we were losing 25 per cent a year.

PN: Considering the fact that it takes three years to train an officer and costs between $5,000 and $7,000, it seems clear that not only can the City afford to pay more to keep its police here but would actually save money. Do you agree with this?

R: Yes. It would cost far less to pay them a bit more and keep them. I think the City's come around a bit on this with the initiation of longevity pay. When I first came here, the idea was not to encourage anyone to stay. But still, I think they would like quality people to leave so they won't have to pay the extra amount.

PN: Two years ago when the City employes were being denied the right to organize into bargaining units, many charges came out against the City Manager and department heads...charges of mismanagement, harassment and threats of dismissal for attempting to organize. The Employe Association claimed secret files were being kept on employes, that job favortism and a grossly inadequate grievance procedure existed. They also charged that the Commissioners were covering up managerial chaos and inefficiency.

Many of these charges were confirmed by members of an investigative committee. Some new charges were made and some of them were even confirmed by the County Attorney. Some changes have occurred. Recently, the grievance procedure was altered so that employes could at least speak to Commissioners without threat of dismissal. You still are not allowed to speak to them as a recognized bargaining group.

Recently, the LPOA publicly charged the City Manager's office with having acted in "bad faith" and your attorney called the City Manager the Commission's "hired gun," and said the situation would "shock the conscience of any reasonable person."

What's going on at City Hall? How much has changed? Do you think there are still some very serious problems within our City government?

R: Yes I do. I still think the City Manager has too much power over the Commissioners. And, that's the Commissioners' own fault. A Commissioner should have enough time to find out what's going on and not have to rely heavily on what the City Manager tells him.

PN: I don't think it's clear to most people how much power and influence Buford Watson has had in this dispute. He has stayed behind the scenes. The Assistant City Manager has been the negotiator. Can you concretely describe how the City Manager has power over the Commissioners?

R: Last year he told us that whatever agreement we could reach with him, he would present to the Commission and they would accept it. They just leave too much up to him. That's where he has gained his power. I don't know what happens when a new Commissioner is elected, but it doesn't take long before that Commissioner is doing exactly what he (the City Manager) wants him to do. I think that this year the Commissioners are more aware of what is going on. I think the employes have made them aware. But whether they want to do anything about it is another thing too. They still rely pretty heavily on Watson's decisions. The whole system of power in this city is not with the Commission or even with the City Manager...the Chamber of Commerce is very powerful too. Last year, the Chamber gave a packet to each Commissioners as to why the City employes should not be recognized by the Employe Relations Act. They had one speaker, a lawyer, who said he was civic minded enough to speak. But, he was also a member of the Chamber. We had quite a few people speak for coming under the Act, and it was subsequently voted down by the Commission.

PN: Does Watson articulate the Chamber's positions to the Commissioners?

R: I think so. The City Attorney's office has some power and then the Chamber but ultimately it's the big boys out of town that own the city...I'm talking about Phillips Petroleum, Hallmark, and then there's one or two out of Topeka that own a lot of land here and then there's the banks, of course... The investigative reports have never been acted on fully. There are allegations that were never acted upon. Quite a few of them could be substantiated.

PN: Could you be more specific?

R: Not really. I'd hate to go into it at this time.

PN: During the negotiations and the three-day slow down were there any threats of job dismissal?

R: Disciplinary action by the Department. But I would expect that. There have been no threats against the Executive Board of the Police Officers Association. There have been a few cases against individual officers... that have kind of cooled some officers from joining the association, particulary among the detectives. And a couple of Patrol officers have been talked to, but it didn't bother them enough to drop out of the association.

PN: Are you saying they were called by someone within the City government?

R: No, within the Police administration. The City Manager's office,to my knowledge, has not exerted any pressure or harassment at all. They tried last year, but they found out it did not work.

PN: If there are still serious allegations that weren't acted upon, do you think that the Commission should be called upon to look into this? Do we need another investigative committee?

R: I just don't know if it would do any good. They just kind of shoved it under the rug and said 'Well, fine. Now let's move on to something else.' It'll catch up with them. God'll get ya...

PN: When the City Manager's office kept postponing the opening of talks early in the summer, wasn't this a deliberate attempt to thwart your efforts at legitimate negotiation?

R: I think so. We allowed it (the closing of the budget) to happen last time, but I think this time, if we go back to the negotiating table and can't reach a compromise within the proposal and we have to go into some concerted job action, we're going back for the money also. We know it's there. The City took a half million dollars out of unallocated salaries in 1977 and gave a lot of people raises. If they can't come up with $45,000 in the 1978 budget, for a four per cent raise, then something's wrong some place. ..I think many times the Commissioners are acting on bad advise. My God, if we went into concerted action to the point where the Highway Patrol were called in, that would cost the City more money to pay for their food and lodging and any other expenses, than it would to pay us four per cent. And if the Firemen went into concerted action with us, the Highway Patrol would be totally lost. They'd have to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to try to cover the city. It would only cost $80,000 to raise both the Police and Fire by four per cent.

PN: What perplexes me is that the Commissioners allow these disputes to go on and on. Shouldn't they be concerned about what their voters think? What do you think motivates them?

R: The Chamber of Commerce and the City Manager. Carter and Clark are pretty high up in the Chamber right now. Al Hack (President of the Lawrence National Bank and former Chamber President) was responsible for everything done against the Police and Fire last year by the Chamber. That was his main job. I think they are more sensitive to the big business aspects of this town and the power and the money than the average voter. I don't know where they get that attitude either. There's a transition period after an election that makes them insensitive to anybody but power.

PN: During the campaign last spring, there was a lot of talk about firing the City Manager. All the candidates said they would, at the very least, investigate the Manager's performance. This didn't seem to happen. What happened is the new Commission gave him a vote of confidence and a big raise. What do you think happened?

R: I think it was set up from the beginning.

PN: How did you know this?

R: Just past experience in knowing how these people operate. It smelled fishy from the beginning. I knew they were not going to get rid of him. He has too big a strong hold on this city.

PN: What does Watson think about the City employes organizing?

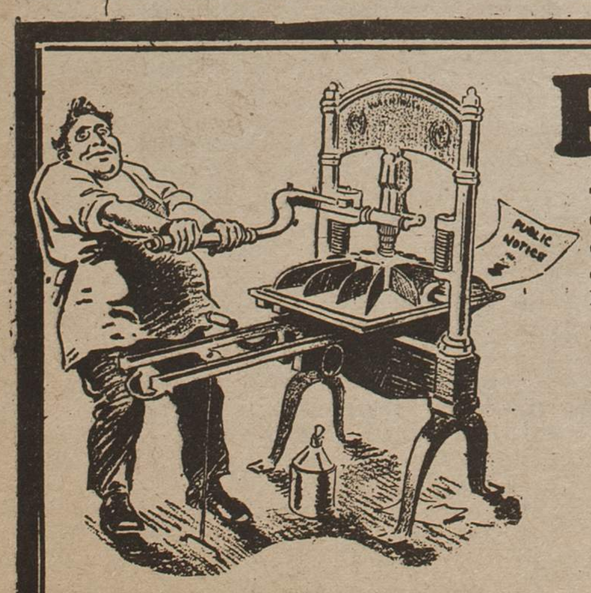
R: He's against it. He doesn't want to lose any of his power. He controls every City department and he doesn't want to lose anything. He's going to fight it.

PN: Is coming under the Public Employer-Employe Relations Act the solution?

R: No. It's just a start...

PN: The Commission has voted not to come under the Act. How could the City be forced to come under this act?

R: It could be done through a referendum vote, which would be all right. Eventually, though, there will be legislation passed, either state or federal, making it mandatory for at least Police and Fire to come under the act. If the state doesn't do it then I think the federal is going to. And of course, that's just one more step toward socialism, and you don't need that at all.



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