

## IN THE NATION

## HEALTH &amp; SAFETY

## County Coroner works for the living

By Dan Marschall

**T**O COMBAT A CONTINUING flood of occupational accidents, an Indiana county coroner, working in one of the nation's most industrialized areas, has turned the resources of his office towards accident prevention and has formed the Coroner's Committee on Industrial Safety, the first of its kind in the country.

In office only nine months, Lake County Coroner Albert T. Willardo has worked to make his department more responsive to community needs, to utilize the expertise of union representatives and to systematize the collection of accident data to better determine the causes of death.

"My work is guided by a central philosophy of getting information out to the public," Willardo told *IN THESE TIMES*. "People have to know exactly what you're doing in order to measure your performance. By turning our attention to prevention, we're slowly showing that we can perform a service no one else in the county can."

"The job of the coroner is not just to pronounce someone dead," adds chief deputy Chuck Smith. "We have to serve the community, save lives, find the real reasons for accidents and help to prevent them in the future."

**Working for the living.**

To carry out this activist conception of a coroner's duties, Willardo has implemented a number of changes in the functioning of his office:

- Every industrial death is guaranteed a full inquest, where department investigators interview witnesses to determine the cause of death and how similar accidents can be avoided;

- Accident statistics over the last decade are being analyzed by computer to find patterns in industrial deaths, the common factors leading to auto accidents, etc.;

- A full-time forensic pathologist has been hired for the first time in the department's history;

- Daily staff meetings are held to review cases;

- A slide show, entitled "The Never Ending War," has been produced to introduce the coroner's office to high school students, community groups and other Lake County residents;

- The department has sponsored well-attended seminars on topics like workers' compensation and sudden infant death syndrome;

- Willardo writes a weekly newspaper column, "Stop...you're killing me," to reveal some of the "incredible, even bizarre, tragedies" so that the "points of accident and death prevention can be forcibly brought home."

Willardo brings impressive qualifications to these tasks. In the late '50s he graduated from Indiana University with a bachelor's degree in government, an M.D. and finally a law degree. Working as a general practitioner in Hammond, Ind., he served as chief deputy coroner from 1965 to 1974. In November 1976 he amassed over 125,000 votes to win the County Coroner seat. His campaign attracted such attention that more people voted in the coroner's race than in any other county contest.

**Preventing accidents.**

The Coroner's Committee on Industrial Safety has already generated waves in the steel mills, oil refineries and manufacturing facilities that sit at the southern end of Lake Michigan. The committee includes representatives from the United Steel Workers, the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers, the Teamsters, the Operating Engineers, the Retail Clerks and



*Dr. Willardo (center) takes aim during gun-training classes with Hammond, Ind., police.*

a host of other unions. Permanent management representatives have joined only recently. In monthly meetings, committee members exchange information, look at specific accidents or deaths, and try to pinpoint the causes to prevent future incidents.

The first purpose of the committee, says Willardo, is to provide expertise that would not otherwise be available. By working with union representatives and rank and file members, the Coroner's office gains knowledge about the work processes that vary from plant to plant.

"My main concern," says Willardo, "is to collect the facts in a systematic, logical way and to make them available to the families of those who died suddenly and to the county prosecutor." The Coroner is at the apex of the county's law enforcement structure. Willardo is empowered to issue subpoenas, call grand juries, and, if necessary, arrest the Sheriff.

The committee's second purpose is to make recommendations to prevent future accidents in similar workplaces.

Because the committee has been operating for only four months, it has recorded no major victories thus far. Nevertheless, a recent incident involving Dean Bainbridge, secretary-treasurer of OCAW Local 7-210, illustrates how the committee is starting to exert pressure on lackadaisical employers.

For months Bainbridge had been after the owner of a particular company to correct the construction of a switchhouse in which the floor was below ground level. When it rained, water poured into the switchhouse, creating very hazardous conditions for anyone working the 220-volt switches. After joining the committee, Bainbridge again approached the employer and threatened to report the situation to the coroner.

Then it was a whole different ballgame," Bainbridge told *IN THESE TIMES*. "This employer knew that the coroner would come out to investigate. So he began to raise the floor the next day."

"While it's too early to tell what accomplishments the committee will make, if it helps to stop one or two deaths, then it's well worth the effort. Dr. Willardo is the best thing to come our way since the electric light bulb."

**A well-placed ally.**

Local health and safety activists hope that through such actions Willardo and his industrial safety committee can begin to fill the gap created by the weak enforcement and understaffing of the state Occupa-

tional Safety and Health Administration. Earlier this year, for instance, Willardo ruled that "willful and wanton negligence" by the company had caused the death of Orison Hatfield, a worker at the East Chicago plant of the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Co. Hatfield was crushed last October by a runaway tractor whose electric brakes failed. For four consecutive months before the mishap, workers on the union-management safety committee had complained that the tractors lacked mechanical brakes and that someone could readily be hurt if the tractors were not repaired.

When Indiana OSHA looked into the case, they imposed what the Steelworkers union denounced as a "laughably light" fine of \$1,000. Even that was reduced to

\$200 in back-room negotiations between OSHA and the company.

When Willardo reexamined the incident he urged that "if criminal action is possible" against the company, "it should be considered." His involvement in the case has resulted in a back-and-forth verbal battle between the company and the Coroner's office.

"In the war on workplace accidents and disease," concludes Dave Simmons, director of the Chicago Area Committee on Occupational Safety and Health, "workers need all the allies they can find. Willardo has brought together key labor people and has enhanced communication between unions that usually don't have much contact with each other. He seems to be a well-placed and influential ally." ■

## NUCLEAR

## Wisconsin declares nuclear moratorium

By Thomas Galazen

**T**HE PUBLIC SERVICE COMMISSION of Wisconsin (PSC), an agency responsible for regulating utilities within the state, has declared a moratorium on future nuclear plants, beyond two units already being considered for construction permits.

The decision came at the end of an "advance planning" process involving 78 days of hearings and over 13,000 pages of transcript. The PSC examined energy demand forecasts for the next 20 years, proposed generating facilities over the next 15 years, and transmission lines planned during the next ten years.

"Nuclear generation," the Commission declared in late August, "is likely to be more costly than coal when considering present uncertainties in fuel, decommissioning, and waste disposal costs."

"The questions of safe and available storage for nuclear wastes, methods and cost of decommissioning, and availability and cost of nuclear fuel in the long term are matters of significant concern," the PSC concluded.

The stand against nuclear power hinged in part upon the lack of a facility for per-

manent disposal of spent nuclear fuel. "Virtually all testimony," the Commission said, "concurred that federal policy regarding nuclear waste management has been indecisive, tardy, not responsive to the industry, and lacking in execution."

The Tyrone nuclear plant, proposed for western Wisconsin, was one unit that will still be considered by the Commission. That facility has been fought for years by an array of activist and citizen groups that have promised to use massive civil disobedience to stop construction of the plant.

Nevertheless, Charles Cicchetti, chair of the Public Service Commission, has stated that "the need-related burden of proof, which we have placed on the proponents of Tyrone, is nearly insurmountable."

"However," Cicchetti continued, "with tens of millions invested, I am willing to give the western utilities the chance of convincing me and making their case that this plant is in the public interest of Wisconsin."

Nuclear opponents have long argued that atomic power is too costly, compared with other sources of energy. It appears, at least in Wisconsin, that those arguments are at least beginning to be heard. ■



## ENERGY

## Congress gas battle peaks

By David Moberg

**R**EP. RALPH METCALFE'S downtown Chicago office was crowded. The people were friends and supporters, representatives of consumer groups, the elderly, progressive unions and liberal political organizations, who had taken for granted Metcalfe's nearly 100 percent voting record in favor of labor and consumers in Congress.

They were not accustomed to lobbying him to change a vote as they were this day, and neither was he. But they had been surprised that Metcalfe had voted for deregulation of natural gas prices last year. They wanted to be sure that he would vote against the current natural gas policy—an odd child born out of 18 months of the intense labor of labyrinthine lobbying and adopted by the Carter administration—if it survived the debate now occurring in the Senate.

The bill would boost consumer gas prices unfairly, pour \$50 billion additional revenue into the treasuries of the oil and gas companies, boost inflation and thereby weaken the dollar, hurt old people and the poor in particular and not even guarantee that more gas would be produced, the lobbyists, pulled together by the Citizen/Labor Energy Coalition, argued. But without submitting to the gas producers' demands, Metcalfe feared people in his district would be even worse off—perhaps facing wintertime shortages as gas was bottled up in the intrastate market, losing jobs because of inadequate fuel, losing factories to the gas-producing states in the Sun Belt.

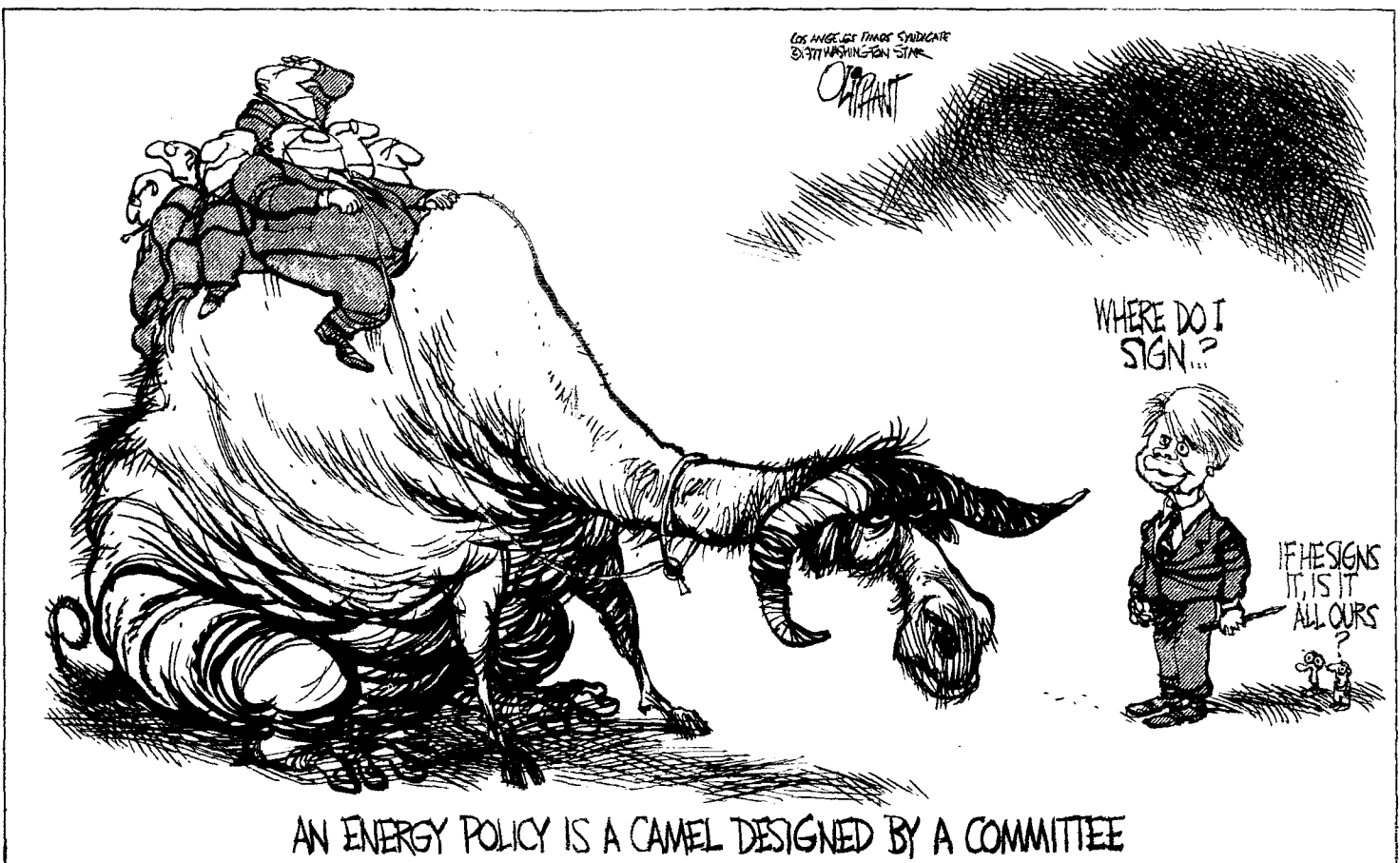
It was an odd confrontation for all involved, but it was hardly the oddest political alignment to occur as the final, monumental showdown on natural gas pricing was taking place. In August it looked like Carter was about to lose the gas portion of his energy bill in the Senate. One other major section—taxes on oil to raise prices to the OPEC level—had been dead for some time. Three others, on coal conversion, utilities and conservation, were virtually certain of approval. But the administration, determined to win the gas-pricing portion, refused to move forward with the three parts that would have made a useful energy bill. Instead, critics say, they held those sections "hostage" to gas pricing.

## You scratch my back...

The Gas Compromise bears little resemblance to the legislation in Carter's energy plan, which raised gas prices but continued controls and expanded interstate access to intrastate gas production. Yet the Carter administration has made the Compromise a testing ground of loyalty not only to the President but also to the nation and the dollar—"the moral equivalent of the Panama Canal treaty," as one critic said.

Top administration officials, including energy chief James Schlesinger, Vice-President Walter Mondale, and Federal Reserve Board chairman G. William Miller, have been working full time to persuade wavering Senators to back the Compromise. They have been accused of manipulating and manufacturing statistics. They have also been accused of a wide range of deals to gain votes—expanded breeder reactor development in exchange for Idaho Sen. James McClure's vote, a federal judgeship for Montana Sen. Paul Hefield, grants and public works projects or ambassadorships and other appointments to other Senators, and promises of tax relief, export barriers and other aid to steel and textile firms. Industrial representatives in particular have been wooed to support the bill and then lobby with reluctant Senators.

Arrayed against the administration amalgam of liberals and conservatives, people who had previously favored total deregulation or opposed it, is a political—even stranger alliance between liberal,



## With breeder bribes, dollar scares and pleas for loyalty, Carter won a first round on gas.

pro-consumer Senators and conservatives who want no federal controls at all.

In the first showdown between these forces, Compromise supporters won. On Sept. 19 the Senate voted 59 to 39 not to recommit the bill to committee with instructions to strike all of the pricing provisions except for a provision covering new gas from Alaska and to keep presidential authority for emergency allocations of gas. Opponents plan to offer another recommitment motion, perhaps sweetened with a few concessions, in an attempt to divert the bill before the final vote, which is scheduled for Sept. 27.

Although they believe they still have a chance to win in either the recommitment or final vote, opponents are shifting their attention toward the House. The first important fight there would probably be over division of the energy bill. House speaker Thomas P. O'Neill, acting for the administration, will try to keep all parts together, presenting members of Congress with a choice of a bill with the gas-pricing compromise or no bill at all.

## What the bill will do.

Debate on the bill has been complicated not only because the politicians involved have differing ideologies, interests and goals but also because there are widely divergent estimates of precisely what the bill will do.

The gas pricing bill, in brief, does the following: (1) deregulates after 1985 all gas defined as "new," which includes some already discovered; (2) deregulates some other categories of gas, including those from exotic sources such as geopressurized deposits, within a year; (3) sets the ceiling for new gas now at \$1.98 per thousand cubic feet (MCF) compared to the current \$1.50/MCF and allows it to rise by about 4 percent a year above inflation; (4) establishes some limited federal jurisdiction over intrastate gas, although far less than in the House-passed bill; (5) sets up a much-compromised incremental pricing plan that was intended to pass on rising costs disproportionately to certain categories of industrial users to encourage conservation (but now it will instead pass on some expense of new, higher-priced gas to residential users, who will pay more for gas in 1985 under the Compromise than under either the House or Senate bills); (6) provides for a complex array of price categories—between 17 and 29, depending on who's counting

—that the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission acknowledges will be difficult to administer.

Administration spokespeople have argued that the bill is necessary to save the ailing dollar, but critics respond that the decline of the dollar stems from a variety of problems other than energy imports. Besides, the gas bill will reduce imports of oil by only 300,000 barrels a day, according to the Energy Information Administration. European and Japanese governments have been pressuring Carter to cut imports of oil to reduce worldwide demand and the likelihood of their own prices going up faster.

Also, the Japanese Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda worried recently that a declining dollar, used as the currency of international pricing, could lead to a spiral of oil price increases. Yet critics maintain that an inflationary gas pricing bill will only weaken the dollar further.

## Will gas supply increase?

For the \$29 billion in extra revenue to gas producers estimated by the EIA—now raised to \$41 billion by last-minute changes in the bill, according to Ohio Sen. Howard Metzenbaum, production could increase over current expectations by 5 percent (or two trillion cubic feet) by 1985 in the optimistic forecast of Sen. Henry Jackson, or by 3.5 percent in the more modest projection of the Congressional Budget Office.

Even those guesses could be thrown off if the companies spend their new income on acquisition of diversified industries, higher prices for drilling rigs (now pushed to the limit of production), bidding up mineral rights or other non-productive activities. Sen. William Proxmire also warned that gas companies may decide that they are earning more in appreciation of the value of gas in the ground—especially in anticipation of deregulation—than they would in producing it. The goal of more gas for interstate consumers is also partly thwarted by the continued separate treatment of intrastate gas and limited federal authority to reallocate it.

Although supply of natural gas will actually decline somewhat between now and 1985 despite the great increases in producer revenue, there is a potentially large supply of gas, particularly the geopressurized supplies in brine off the Gulf Coast. Such exotic sources could yield

from three to six thousand trillion cubic feet of gas by current estimates, enough to last 150 years at current rates of consumption, but undoubtedly at much higher prices. Yet deregulation, Robert Scott, energy researcher Barry Commoner's Center for Biology of Natural Systems, is not an efficient way of getting this new gas "because you can't rely on the oil companies to provide a supply of gas at a reasonable price. Because of incredible demand and inelasticity in response to price there is a large area for potential abuse of consumers." The current bill, he says, will not yield the new gas but simply "increase the power of oil companies versus the public."

The oil companies already have immense power: they control the flow of gas even if the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission nominally controls the price. They have even been able to push up the price from an average of 17¢/MCF in 1970 to 78¢/MCF in 1977 under regulators friendly to the companies. When Sen. Metzenbaum argued that FERC was now prepared to act for consumers and would not raise gas prices as much as the Compromise, Sen. Henry Jackson responded, "The trouble with that argument is that the Federal Energy Commission does not have the power they should have, which is to get the gas."

Indeed, that is the power the federal government needs—to produce the gas that exists in the most efficient way, directing it toward the uses that make most sense for a national energy policy. Instead of doing that directly, as public ownership of natural gas and oil resources would allow, Congress is left with two inadequate alternatives. One is regulation that the companies can subvert, particularly with the help of their allies in Congress. The other is deregulation that turns over to a cartel created by Congress the power to exact whatever price it can from a captive public and then use the money for whatever it wishes.

Short of such public ownership and rational production, continued regulation is by far the preferable course for protecting consumers while increasing supply, even for saving the dollar.

At this point the convoluted politics of the natural gas bill seem beyond much clear-headed debate. When not mired in the conflicting estimates of how gas companies will respond to their largesse, many members of Congress seem to have passed into the ethereal realm of playing poker with international bankers and of giving Carter and Congress the chance to crow, "We did something. (But don't ask too closely what it was.)" ■