

State board angers AFL-CIO, denies participation in hearing

Fate of workers' compensation rate hangs in balance

AUSTIN (AP) — The State Board of Insurance outraged labor leaders Tuesday by refusing to allow the state's largest labor union to participate as a party in the workers' compensation rate hearing.

"I knew they'd screw us. I just didn't think they would do it in public," said Joe Gunn, president of the Texas AFL-CIO. But, he said, "this doesn't surprise me. You've got the fox guarding the henhouse over there."

The action prohibits the Texas AFL-CIO, which represents 230,000 members, from cross-examining witnesses in the rate hearings. The labor organization was the only group rejected by the Insurance Board to participate as a party, or intervenor, in the weeklong hearing.

The three-member insurance board unanimously accepted as intervenors groups representing the insurance industry, consumers, trial lawyers, and business.

Workers' compensation is insurance purchased by an employer to cover expenses for employees who are injured or die on the job.

Lawmakers have tried unsuccessfully all year to reform the Texas workers' comp system, which has been criticized for high premiums and low benefits. The Legislature will meet again in a

special session in November to tackle the problem another time.

The AFL-CIO said workers have a direct stake in the rate hearing because the Insurance Board's action could affect employees statewide. Board member Richard Reynolds of Flower

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Mound led the 2-1 vote against the AFL-CIO, saying labor's concerns over job safety were not relevant to setting rates for workers' comp insurance.

Board chairman Paul Wrotenbery of Austin, however, voted for labor, saying he was "hesitant to exclude" any group.

But Jo Ann Howard of Austin voted with Reynolds, saying she wanted to allow only intervenors who could testify on what rate should be granted.

The insurance industry has requested a 34.9 percent rate increase, while the state's insurance consumer office has recommended a 17.5 percent increase and the board staff, an 11.5 percent increase.

Ellen Widess, a consultant to the AFL-CIO, said further increases in workers' comp insurance — which has risen 148 percent over the past four years — may force more employers to drop coverage, thus leaving workers unprotected and unable to get benefits if they are injured.

"Our interests are on behalf of hundreds of thousands of workers," she told the board.

Earlier, Kay Doughty, general counsel for the Office of Consumer Protection, objected to allowing the insurance industry to participate as a party in the hearing.

Doughty said the National Council on Compensation Insurance has a conflict of interest because it represents insurers while also supplying data that the board considers when approving a rate structure.

Air Force begins investigation of fatal F-16 fighter jet crash

CARSWELL AIR FORCE BASE (AP) — Air Force investigators said Tuesday they will gather facts over the next 30 days and then reconstruct the crash of an F-16 fighter jet that killed two men after the aircraft slammed into the ground at Carswell Air Force Base in Fort Worth Sunday.

The FBI, meanwhile, discounted a report that a terrorist might have been responsible for the crash, although federal agents are searching for a man who made a telephone call claiming responsibility.

The pilot, Maj. Robert K. Tucker, 37, and back-seat passenger, Marine

Capt. James T. Bourne, 33, were killed in the accident.

Col. David R. Smith, president of the Accident Investigation Board for the Air Force, said a flight data box from the F-16 had been recovered from the plane's debris, which was scattered over a runway at Carswell.

Smith said investigators had not yet examined any recordings from the box. Five Air Force officials make up the board investigating the crash. The investigation is expected to last eight to 12 months.

Capt. Barbara Carr said Tucker was preparing to simulate the bombing of a row of F-4 jets parked on an

apron at Carswell when his plane slammed into the ground.

Bourne was taking part in an intramilitary program in which members of the different branches observe each other in action, said Air Force Capt. Barbara Carr.

Tucker's jet crashed while he was banking to the right to head toward the F-4s, Carr said.

Instead, Tucker's jet hurtled into the ground and disintegrated on impact.

Air Force investigators discounted the possibility that the F-16's wing hit the ground while making its turn — causing the aircraft to crash.

Unlikely duo rallies support to save school

AMARILLO (AP) — It was a match made in elementary school.

Comedian-actor Bill Cosby and oilman-corporate raider T. Boone Pickens joined Monday night to raise money to keep Carver Elementary Academy open.

The school, which uses computer-based instruction, opened this fall. It was the first elementary to be opened in Amarillo's predominantly minority North Heights section in 17 years.

"Remember what I did tonight for you," Cosby told about 50 Carver second-graders before his performance, which netted \$175,000 for the school's budget. "You're looking at a grown-up who could be home with his wife, sitting there watching Monday Night Football."

"I gave this up to come here and save your school," Cosby added in mock seriousness. "At least you could study and become something."

Until Pickens' Mesa Limited Partnership promised in March to contribute more than \$400,000 to the school district, Carver's future was in doubt.

Mesa agreed to "adopt" the school by paying half its estimated \$850,000 operating budget during the first two years and to find other private funding.

Texas, Tokyo tout trade expansion

TOKYO (AP) — State officials are taking steps to expand trade with Japan with a new Texas office in Tokyo.

"This new office is symbolic of a new commitment to our relationship to promote the prosperity of Japan and Texas," State Rep. Alvin R. Granoff said Tuesday in ceremonies opening the office.

Granoff, a Democrat from Dallas, was one of 57 Texans attending the 16th annual Japan-Texas conference, a four-day event aimed at promoting trade, business opportunities and other exchanges.

"We are pleased to have our office in your country so we can learn more about what we can offer each other," Granoff told a news conference.

Japan is Texas' third largest export market, with exports here totaling \$27.4 billion in 1988. Japan buys Texan electronic products, computer equipment, ma-

chinery, oil refining equipment and agricultural products.

Japan is the largest exporter to Texas, followed by West Germany.

"I believe it is Texas that enjoys (a trade) surplus," said Rebecca Reynolds Bannister, a director of the Texas Department of Commerce. But she said a figure for Japanese exports to the second-largest U.S. state was not readily available because some products entered via ports in other states.

State Rep. Barry Connelly said the office represents "a commitment of the entire Texas government."

He added: "Mr. Granoff is a member of the Democratic Party and I'm a member of the Republican Party. So we both are sitting here today committed to the economic development of our state. There's no politics when it comes to that."

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