

PROVINCE

LBR boss resigns

VANCOUVER (CP) — The B.C. government is replacing the controversial chairman of the provincial Labour Relations Board almost two years before his contract expires.

Sources said Keith Oleksiuk is being replaced because of a lack of confidence in his ability to lead the quasi-judicial body with impartiality.

Oleksiuk, an NDP appointee and former steelworkers' union executive, has been under steady fire from the business community since 1998 for an alleged pro-labour bias.

He refused to comment Thursday but the board issued a short statement on his behalf, saying he elected to step down.

Seniors scam shut down

VANCOUVER (CP) — The RCMP's telemarketing task force has shut down an operation selling fraudulent British bonds to U.S. seniors.

Acting on information from the U.S. Federal Trade Commission, the squad raided locations in Vancouver and Coquitlam. Police traced hundreds of thousands of dollars that flowed through B.C. bank accounts and are tracing more accounts offshore, said RCMP Staff Sgt. Peter Montague.

The police made the raid after the commission charged B.B.M. Investments and Timothy Ryan Atkinson in Seattle with seven counts of fraud, deceptive practices and violations of the U.S. Telemarketing Sales Rule.

Assault charge dropped

VANCOUVER (CP) — The Crown has dropped charges of common assault against the principal of a strict Islamic school near Hope.

Mohammed Qasmi said Thursday he will reopen his all-boy Islamic College of B.C. He voluntarily shut it down last October after police raided the school.

Crown counsel decided to drop the charges because of conflicts in the student's statements about being abused by Qasmi. The Crown also cited a section in the Criminal Code that allows reasonable discipline.

Section 43 of the code allows a parent — or a person acting as a parent — to use physical force to correct their child's behavior.

Alaska wants rail link

Southam Newspapers

VANCOUVER — Alaskans were in Vancouver Thursday, putting the case before an international seminar for a railway linking their state with B.C. The cost? \$3 billion US.

The visitors backed a resolution calling for a U.S.-Canada commission to be formed to assess the feasibility of a railway to connect the Alaska Railroad with the Canadian railway network.

Anchorage-based consultant Hal Cooper said that a powerful motive for the U.S. government to get involved is its interest in building an anti-missile shield. This would require a huge construction effort in Alaska and a railway could efficiently deliver supplies.

Jobs lost by WCB rule

Southam Newspapers

VANCOUVER — Over 500 hospital workers have been laid off since B.C. went smoke-free, the Coalition of Hospitality Organizations (COHO) reported Thursday.

"These are not job losses that can be attributed to a slow January," said Vance Campbell, President of the B.C. Cabaret Owners Association. "Managers are comparing their revenues year over year, and are noticing a marked decrease from Jan. 1999. Smokers are staying home."

The Workers Compensation Board issued a Jan. 1 deadline to ban smoking in all workplaces, including restaurants, bars and bingo halls.

Youth migrants missing from group homes

Southam Newspapers

VANCOUVER — About 21 of the 116 underage Chinese migrants who arrived last summer are now missing from their provincial group homes.

Canada Immigration has issued warrants for 10 of the missing children who failed to show up for refugee hearings.

"But I think the number of kids we have lost track of is even higher. The last number I heard is 21," said Vaugh-

an Dowie, assistant deputy minister for the Ministry of Children and Families.

Dowie said the children walked away from unlocked group homes where they are attending school in the Lower Mainland and Victoria.

The disappearances were reported to the RCMP and immigration department, Dowie said. The number of missing children is low compared to the number of adults who abandoned their refugee claims, he said.

"We have done a pretty good job of getting kids involved in this process."

Sixty-four of the 86 adults released from the first boat are now missing. Adults on all three subsequent boats were detained.

A detention review was held Thursday for four teenage boys who landed at the Vancouver port with a group of Chinese migrants in two shipping containers earlier this month. The boys were detained for another week to give

immigration officials more time to determine their identities.

As the hearing was underway, the Vancouver Association of Chinese Canadians held a press conference marking the six month anniversary of the boat people's arrival and criticizing the government's handling of the problem to date.

In a presentation long on criticism and short on solutions, Victor Wong, director of the association, called on

Ottawa to release the more than 400 migrants in detention pending the outcome of their refugee claims.

They have been detained on the ground that the majority of Fukinese refugee claimants are unlikely to appear for their hearings.

Wong said that policy is racist, although he admitted his argument against detention was not helped by the disappearance of those released from the first boat.



Southam Newspapers photo

Non-teaching staff at schools in Burnaby, Pitt Meadows and Maple Ridge walked off the job Thursday forcing the closure of all schools in the municipalities because unionized teachers refused to cross the picket.

Strike puts 40,000 kids out of school

VANCOUVER (CP) — The 35 public schools in Delta will likely be behind picket lines Monday if a settlement isn't reached in a strike by support workers that closed schools in three other local municipalities Thursday.

"If nothing changes, we would be out Monday morning," said Colin Pawson, president of Canadian Union of Public Employees, Local 1091, which represents 800 Delta support workers.

Strike notice was issued by the Delta local Wednesday after members voted 85 per cent in favour of a strike.

CUPE members walked out Thursday in the Burnaby and Maple Ridge-Pitt Meadows school districts. There are 40,000 students at the two districts' 78 schools.

Richmond, Vancouver, North Vancouver, Mission and Langley school districts are also involved in negotiations, however, these districts are not on the verge of strike action.

Ron Burton, spokesman for the eight school districts that have formed a regional bargaining unit, said Thursday he hopes that talks, which broke down early Thursday, will get back on track.

The school boards want the Education Ministry to give incentives to persuade the workers — janitors, clerks and teaching assistants — to settle. Like all unionized employees in the B.C. public sector, CUPE members who work in schools are restricted by law to wage increases of zero, zero, and two per cent over three years.

Doctors, gov't reach new deal

VICTORIA (CP) — Doctors and the B.C. government have reached a tentative deal that should bring an end to job action by physicians for at least two years.

The proposed deal between the B.C. Medical Association and the Health Ministry sets a budget for doctors' fees for the current and the upcoming fiscal year. It still must be approved by the government and association's 7,500 members.

No financial amounts or details were released Thursday.

Association president Dr. Ian Courtice said the new agreement brings some stability for the next two years

and will mean an end to reduced activity days.

B.C. doctors, angered by government moves to make up budget shortfalls by clawing them back from doctors' payments, scheduled reduced activity days the last two years.

On these pre-announced days doctors would close their offices and administer only to patients in emergencies.

The reduced activity days put an extra strain on already jammed emergency rooms because patients with nowhere else to go would head for their local hospitals.

Courtice said the new agreement,

however, is only a short term working arrangement.

Negotiations for a long-term master agreement, detailing how health-care priorities will be set and how the association can gain some input into that process, has yet to be concluded, he said.

Health Ministry spokesman Jeff Gaulin said it's hoped the new agreement signals the beginning of a better relationship.

"We feel it is a deal that will renew our working relationship with the BCMA," he said. "We hope to turn the page and focus on what we need to do and that is serve patients."

Deaths ruled murder-suicide

PORT ALBERNI, B.C. (CP) — A local man shot his wife and teenage son before setting the family's house on fire and turning the gun on himself, investigators said Thursday.

The RCMP, coroners, and fire investigators released the information following a week-long investigation of the fire.

Rick Moretto, 43, his wife Debra, 42, and their son Kristopher, who turned 18 the day before the fire, died of gunshot wounds, police said.

"The fire scene investigation, interviews, and autopsy results point to this matter being a case of homicides, with the house being set on fire prior to Rick Moretto's suicide," said Sgt. John Van Schaik.

"Autopsy results further reveal that Debra and Kristopher died prior to the fire."

Van Schaik said the fire likely started after 1 a.m. Jan. 12. Police don't know what motivated Rick Moretto's actions. Investigators are still conducting toxicology and residue tests and trying to determine what caused the fire.

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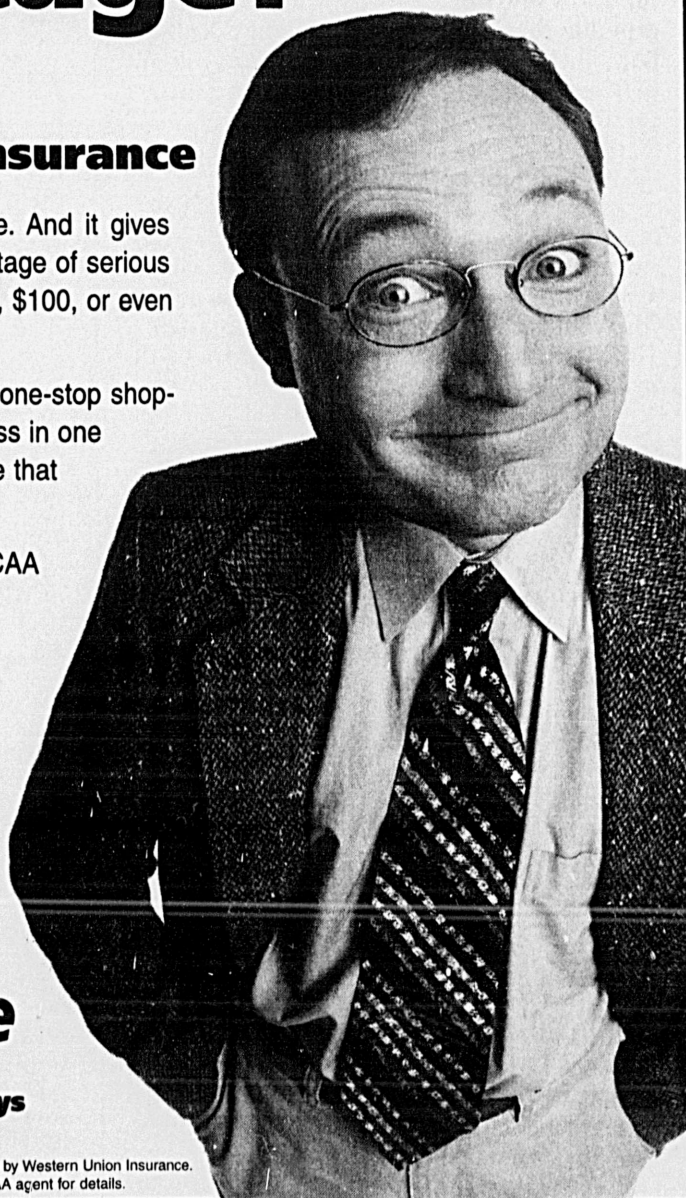
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