

On The Inside

OSR Chief 'Keeps His Cool' In Toughest Test



BENNETT COOPER

As events at the Ohio State Reformatory developed over the last three days Supt. Bennett J. Cooper has undergone one of the toughest tests of his career in penology.

Monday's work stoppage by correction officers was the first in the history of the Mansfield prison and created a difficult, and possibly dangerous situation.

Since that time Cooper's main thoughts have been with the 2,300 inmates he is responsible for.

With the 200-member union on strike only about half the usual 125 correction officers showed up for work on the first shift yesterday morning.

The National Guard was summoned to Mansfield to stand by in case it was needed and state highway patrolmen frequently cruised by the prison.

Throughout this Cooper remained calm and deliberate.

A native of Cleveland, he holds bachelor's and master's degrees in psychology from Case Western Reserve University, and has completed work on his doctorate there.

He has been at OSR since 1957. He started as director of psychological services and advanced to superintendent in November, 1966.

Cooper, who would not look out of place as a member of the Cleveland Browns' front four, is a quiet, thoughtful administrator.

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Cooper, discussed today what recent events at OSR have been like.

April 30 had officially been designated as "S-Day" by the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.

When Local 1741 launched its "sick call" Monday night, Cooper was ready.

Sources have indicated that the Mansfield facility had been stocking food and supplies for some time.

As to the specific hour when the strike hit, Cooper said, "We got the word at about 9 p.m. that the Ohio Penitentiary had voted for a walkout at midnight. We then anticipated something would happen here.

"Some people began calling in sick. Some didn't call, but never showed up."

Pickets appeared at the prison at 10:20 p.m. Monday. They informed their co-workers that "S-Day" was in effect.

"Only eight men and a supervisor came in on third shift. We therefore held the second trick over.

"We released these men in the morning and called in all the supervisors at 6 a.m."

Throughout all this Cooper was in constant touch with the Division of Correction in Columbus. By 8 a.m. officials there had ordered the National Guard to Mansfield.

Cooper, constantly interrupted by telephone

calls during the interview, stressed his desire of keeping the inmates locked up as little as possible.

The prisoners were fed in smaller groups than usual and more slowly. One cell block saw a movie yesterday afternoon. Another group saw one last night.

Cooper addressed himself to the problem of low wages for guards — the reason for the strike.

"I have always said I feel the employees here are underpaid — especially the correction officers. For the hazards and nature of their work they certainly deserve higher pay . . . and officials in the Division of Correction including Director Martin Janis have gone on record supporting such action."

Hesitating to discuss how recent events have affected him personally Cooper said, "I want no sympathy — I just want to get this thing settled."



OSR VIGIL — National Guard Sgt. Gary Etheridge of Akron surveys prison activities from a tower position on the west wall of the Ohio State Reformatory. Guardsmen are now manning towers and walls at the prison. (Photo by Terry Wolf)