

Mike Wallace

twenty-one

"I GUESS I WAS BORN TO BE A MINER."

"I guess I was born to be a miner and work in a mine," were the words of Mr. Mike Prusi as he explained his career choice. Mr. Prusi was born in Bell Memorial Hospital on October 12, 1949, into a family of five boys and three girls.

Mr. Prusi has been employed in the mining industry for over nineteen years, and he has worked in many different mines. He started at the Mather B which was the last underground mine in Marquette County. When the Mather B was closed, he worked at the Tilden, but he was laid off from there. His next job was at the Brownstone Shop.

When Mr. Prusi returned to mining, he worked at the Empire until he went back to the Tilden Mine. Finally he returned to the Empire where he currently is now.

At the Mather B Mr. Prusi was mainly working as an underground scraperman which involved loading cars with ore. Underground mining was no breeze because workers are on a 150 foot raise. One misstep, and the worker would fall to the bottom. There were many dangerous situations, and Mr. Prusi's dad had a couple of bad injuries. A falling rock broke his shoulder as well as his leg. Mr. Prusi's grandfather also had an accident in which he lost an eye at an underground mine in Gwinn, and he never went back to work.

Some of the working conditions at the mine are unbearable.

It's extremely loud. There's crushing and grinding all day that makes dust which results in bad breathing. It's also hot in the summer and slippery too.

Now at the Empire Mr. Prusi is a plant repairman which means he repairs and maintains all the process equipment, like conveyors, reducers, loaders, pumps, screens, or whatever breaks down and needs to be fixed. He makes sure it gets back up and running.

Do not think that any of these jobs are easy to get. Workers need special training to get into the plant repairman's field. A worker may either go through the training program which is four years and then pass a certain amount of performance tests or a worker can test right into the craft, but has to demonstrate a certain skill level to get the job. Also helpful is a definite computer related skill, industrial arts, welding and electronic or machinery maintenance.

There are many safety standards to change. It is slowly improving but "There's a lot of areas where it could be a lot better particularly out in the open pit," explains Mr. Prusi. Out in the pit operation there is so much big machinery going around in all weather, all hours of the night and it's loud.

Mr. Prusi would like to see the company and the union work a little closer together to make the improvements that the people on the job notice and suggest. The workers have a hard time getting the company to agree to do things that they suggest and that workers know are necessary.

Currently Mr. Prusi is the president of the union local. So of course, he is a member of the steelworkers' union too. Mr. Prusi has been on three strikes in his career as a miner: 111

days in 1977, 123 days in 1990, and last December workers spent thirty-eight days on strike. A strike begins when there is a breakdown in the negotiations between the union bargainers and the company bargainers. They can not reach agreement on the issues in front which could include wages, pension, benefits, and language of the contract. The purpose of a picket line is to monitor who is going in and out of the facility and also to demonstrate to people passing by or that the people on the picket line are involved in a labor dispute. "We basically monitor who's going in and out and get our message across," explains Mr. Prusi. He details what happens at a picket line. "There are plenty of things that go on that are quite amusing, I think one of the nicest things is that a lot of picketers would put out leftover hotdogs or fish or whatever they had for their snack or meal out there, feeding the foxes and putting out bread, and vegetables for the deer at the Empire picket line. We feed the foxes and the deer and ravens and the whole shot, but you know there's a whole lot of things that go on at the picket line."

At a union meeting there's basically a set agenda or a committee report on activities for the month. Safety factors, computer services, and staff reports for the international representative are given. The steelworkers' union is important to Mr. Prusi because, "They basically provide the workers with a way to deal with their employer, then offer them a lot of measure of protection contractually like the steelworkers negotiate contracts with the employer and attempt to make the employer make all the proportions of that contract." he stated.

In Mr. Prusi's view the future for the Empire Mine holds at least another twenty to twenty-five years of production. The

future for the iron and steel industry holds a modest growth in production. He believes the economy will grow a little for the next five or six years. Right now the Empire Mine is the largest producer of ore in the history of Michigan which made its 150 millionth ton a while back.

Mr. Prusi is a great miner and he has contributed a lot to the mines he worked in. He has made me more aware of what it is like to be like a miner and a union member. Thank you Mr. Prusi for all the information you've given me.