

2 Star Witnesses Due Before Mob Probe Panel

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BATON ROUGE — The legislative Mafia investigating committee is due to hear two star witnesses Thursday as a result of defeats dealt the witnesses in court.

Rep. James Strain of Shreveport was found guilty of contempt in state court here for defying a subpoena last month to testify in the probe of organized crime in Louisiana.

David Chandler, the Life magazine

reporter whose story set off the probe into Mafia influence in government, lost a bid to avoid testifying before the committee when U.S. Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black denied his request for a delay in answering a committee subpoena.

CHANDLER SAID in New Orleans it is his understanding he will appear before the committee Thursday.

Judge Elven Ponder of Baton Rouge found Strain in contempt but delayed sentencing until Monday. This prompted speculation Strain might also testify at Thursday's hearing. Strain could receive a 10-day jail sentence on the contempt conviction.

Strain's attorney, Robert Pugh of Shreveport, said it was uncertain what course will be followed. An appeal, he said, would have to await imposition of sentence. Ponder issued his ruling after knocking down a series of attempts by Pugh to challenge first the jurisdiction of the court and then the right of the committee to proceed against a lawmaker.

JUDGE PONDER held that Strain's status as a legislator gave him no special immunity from being in contempt of the legislature.

Strain, a physician, said before the opening of court proceedings that he no longer is opposed to appearing before the committee.

He said he defied the committee's

subpoena earlier because he wanted to bring his information before the East Baton Rouge Parish grand jury. He was blocked by the district attorney when he declined to sign a waiver of immunity from testifying before the grand jury.

THE LAWMAKER claims to have tape recordings of an alleged bribe offer to vote for tax increases at the 1970 session of the legislature.

The Mafia committee is scheduled to meet Thursday and possibly Friday with a number of witnesses already scheduled to testify.

However, Strain said that since he could not appear before the grand jury, he is willing now to go before the Mafia committee. He said he could play the tapes for the committee if asked to do so.

He had been subpoenaed to bring his tape recordings with him.

GORDON KEAN, chief counsel for the committee, was asked if Strain would appear this week and he replied that such an appearance probably would have a "salutory" effect on whatever sentence is contemplated by the court Monday.

There was the strong possibility that the court would give Dr. Strain an opportunity to purge himself of the contempt citation by agreeing to testify before the committee.

He had appeared voluntarily once

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before in a much publicized hearing and was unable to support his allegations of bribery. His charges about Mafia influence in nursing homes also foundered when he gave a circuitous

explanation of how he linked organized crime to improper care of patients.

AFTER THAT appearance, Strain reiterated his charges and then claimed to have tape recordings of the incidents.

He defied the Mafia committee and summoned his own health committee into session in an effort to thwart the subpoena.

Judge Ponder considered testimony concerning the health committee hearing and then apparently agreed with Kean's position that the hearing was designed solely to forestall the subpoena.

KEAN DECLARED that had not the committee proceeded as it had against Strain then its entire process may well have broken down.

Also on the list of witnesses are District Attorney Frank Langridge of Jefferson Parish and his chief investigator, Joseph "Zip" Chimento.

Chimento was named by Aaron Kohn, New Orleans Metropolitan Crime Commission director, in an incident involving underworld figure Carlos Marcello during testimony before the committee.