

OPINION OF THE TRUSTEES

In Re

Complainant: Pensioner
Respondent: Employer
ROD Case No: 81-693 - September 3, 1986

Board of Trustees: Joseph P. Connors, Sr., Chairman; Paul R. Dean, Trustee; William B. Jordan, Trustee; William Miller, Trustee; Donald E. Pierce, Jr., Trustee.

Pursuant to Article IX of the United Mine Workers of America ("UMWA") 1950 Benefit Plan and Trust, and under the authority of an exemption granted by the United States Department of Labor, the Trustees have reviewed the facts and circumstances of this dispute concerning the provision of health benefits coverage for a Pensioner under the terms of the Employer Benefit Plan.

Background

The Complainant is a Pensioner whose last signatory classified employment was for the Respondent. The Respondent was signatory to the National Bituminous Coal Wage Agreement ("Wage Agreement") of 1981, which expired September 30, 1984, and did not sign the 1984 Wage Agreement. The Complainant was awarded a Deferred-Vested Special Pension based on 24 years of classified signatory service, effective August 1, 1983. He was advised by letter to contact his last signatory Employer, the Respondent, concerning the provision of health benefits coverage. A copy of that letter was sent to the Respondent. The Complainant contends that the Respondent has refused to provide his health benefits coverage.

Dispute

Whether the Respondent is responsible for providing health benefits to the Complainant as a Pensioner.

Position of the Parties

Position of the Complainant: Under the terms of the 1981 Wage Agreement the Respondent is responsible for the continuing provision of health benefits coverage to the Complainant as a Pensioner.

Position of the Respondent: The Respondent has stated through his representative that he is not able to provide health benefits coverage to a Pensioner who worked only 6 months in his employ.

Pertinent Provisions

Article XX(c)(3)(i) of the National Bituminous Coal Wage Agreement of 1981 provides:

Each signatory Employer shall establish and maintain an Employee benefit plan to provide, implemented through an insurance carrier(s), health and other non-pension benefits for its Employees covered by this Agreement as well as pensioners, under the 1974 Pension Plan and Trust, whose last signatory classified employment was with such Employer. The benefits provided by the Employer to its eligible Participants pursuant to such plans shall be guaranteed during the term of this Agreement by that Employer at levels set forth in such plans. Such plans shall also include that each signatory Employer continue to make the death benefit payments in pay status as of December 5, 1977, for deceased Employees and pensioners under the 1974 Pension Plan whose last signatory classified employment was with such Employer, in the same manner and in the same amounts as previously provided for in the 1974 Benefit Plan and Trust. The plans established pursuant to this subsection are incorporated by reference and made a part of this Agreement, and the terms and conditions under which the health and other non-pension benefits will be provided under such plans are as to be set forth in such plans.

Article I (1), (2) and (5) of the Employer Benefit Plans provide:

Article I - Definitions

The following terms shall have the meanings herein set forth:

- (1) "Employer" means (Employer's Name).
- (2) "Wage Agreement" means the National Bituminous Coal Wage Agreement of 1981, as amended from time to time and any successor agreement.
- (5) "Pensioner" shall mean any person who is receiving a pension, other than (i) a deferred vested pension based on less than 20 years of credited service or, (ii) a pension based in whole or in part on years of service credited under the terms of Article II G of the 1974 Pension Plan, or any corresponding paragraph of any successor thereto, under the 1974 Pension Plan (or any successor thereto), whose last classified signatory employment was with the Employer, subject to the provisions of Article II B of this Plan.

Article II.B. (1) of the Employer Benefit Plan provides:

B. Pensioners

Health benefits and life insurance under Article III hereof shall be provided to Pensioners as follows:

- (1) Any Pensioner who is not again employed in classified signatory employment subsequent to
 - (a) such Pensioner's initial date of retirement under the 1974 Pension Plan, and
 - (b) June 7, 1981, shall be eligible for coverage as a Pensioner under, and subject to all other provisions of this Plan. Notwithstanding (i) and (ii) of the definition of Pensioner in Article I (5) of this Plan, any such Pensioner who was eligible for benefits under the 1974 Benefit Plan as a Pensioner on December 5, 1977, shall be eligible for such benefits, subject to all other provisions of this Plan.

Discussion

Article XX(c)(3)(i) of the 1981 Wage Agreement requires a signatory employer to establish and maintain an employer benefit plan to provide health and other non-pension benefits for its pensioners whose last classified employment was with such employer. Inasmuch as the Complainant's last signatory classified employment was with the Respondent, the Respondent is responsible to provide his health benefits during the term of the 1981 Wage Agreement.

The present issue is whether the Respondent is contractually obligated to provide such coverage beyond the expiration of the 1981 Wage Agreement when the Respondent did not sign the 1984 Wage Agreement. The United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit, in Dist. 29, United Mine Workers of America, et. al. v. Royal Coal Co., 768 F.2d 588, 592 (4th Cir. 1985) and Dist. 17, United Mine Workers of America, et. al. v. Allied Corp., etc., 765 F. 41, 417 (4th Cir. 1985) (en banc), has ruled that an Employer's contractual obligation to provide health benefits to its pensioners does not extend beyond the expiration of the Wage Agreement.

Opinion of the Trustees

The Respondent is responsible for providing the Complainant `s health benefits coverage from August 1, 1983 through the expiration of the 1981 Wage Agreement on September 30, 1984. However, given the controlling language of the applicable Wage Agreement and Plan documents and in light of the Fourth Circuit's recent decisions, the Respondent is not responsible for providing health benefits to the Complainant following the expiration of the 1981 Wage Agreement.