
OPINION OF TRUSTEES

In Re

Complainants: Laid-off Employees
Respondent: Employer
ROD Case No: 88-156 - September 25, 1989

Board of Trustees: Joseph P. Connors, Sr., Chairman; Paul R. Dean, Trustee; William Miller, Trustee; Donald E. Pierce, Jr., Trustee; Thomas H. Saggau, 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 continued benefits coverage for laid-off Employees under the terms of the Employer Benefit Plan.

Background Facts

The Complainants were employed in classified positions for the Respondent until November 4, 1988, when they were laid off and the company ceased operations. The representative for the Complainants states that the Complainants have not had dental and health benefits coverage since September 1988 because the Respondent, a signatory employer, failed to pay the insurance premiums. As a result, the Complainants have incurred dental and medical bills that have not been paid.

Dispute

Whether the Respondent or the UMWA Benefit Plan and Trust is responsible for providing dental and health benefits coverage for the Complainants beyond September 1988.

Positions of the Parties

Position of the Complainants: The Respondent or the UMWA 1974 Benefit Plan and Trust is responsible for providing dental and health benefits coverage for the Complainants beyond September 1988.

Position of the Respondent: The Respondent has not replied to repeated correspondence from Funds' staff requesting its position in this dispute.

Pertinent Provisions

Article XX Section (c)(3)(i) of the National Bituminous Coal Wage Agreement of 1988 provides in pertinent part:

(3)(i) 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.

Article I (1), (2) and (4) of the Employer Benefit Plan 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 1988, as amended from time to time and any successor agreement.
- (4) "Employee" shall mean a person working in a classified job for the Employer, eligible to receive benefits hereunder.

Article II A. (4) of the Employer Benefit Plan provides:

Article II - Eligibility

The persons eligible to receive the health benefits pursuant to Article III are as follows:

- A. Active Employees

- (4) A new Employee will be eligible for health benefits from the first day worked with the Employer.

Article III D. (1) (a) of the Employer Benefit Plan provides:

Article III - Benefits

D. General Provisions

(1) Continuation of Coverage

(a) Layoff

If an Employee ceases work because of layoff, continuation of health, life and accidental death and dismemberment insurance coverage is as follows:

Number of Hours Worked for
the Employer in the 24
Consecutive Calendar Month
Period Immediately Prior to
the Employee's Date
Last Worked

Period of Coverage
Continuation from the
Date Last Worked

2,000 or more hours
500 or more but less than
2,000 hours 6 months
Less than 500 hours

Balance of month plus 12 months
Balance of month plus
30 days

Discussion

Article XX Section (c)(3)(i) of the 1988 Wage Agreement requires a signatory Employer to establish and maintain an Employer Benefit Plan to provide health and other non-pension benefits for its Employees. The Wage Agreement stipulates that benefits provided by the Employer pursuant to such Plan shall be guaranteed during the term of the Agreement by that Employer at levels set forth in such Plan.

Article II A. of the Employer Benefit Plan provides health benefits coverage for active Employees working in classified jobs for a signatory Employer. In addition, Article III D. (1) (a) provides continued benefits coverage for laid off Employees for a defined period based upon the

number of hours worked for the Employer during the 24-month period immediately prior to the date last worked. Inasmuch as the Complainants were actively employed in classified positions by the Respondent until they were laid off on November 4, 1988, the Respondent is responsible for providing health benefits coverage during their employment and during their individual periods of eligibility for continued coverage as determined under Article III. D. (1) (a) of the Employer Benefit Plan.

The Complainants have asked in the alternative whether benefits might be provided by the 1974 Benefit Plan and Trust. Under that Plan, a beneficiary may be entitled to coverage if his last signatory employer is "no longer in business." However, a "no longer in business" determination is made according to established procedures separate from the ROD process.

Dental benefits are provided under Article XX-A of the Coal Wage Agreement. The Trustees have authority to resolve disputes involving benefits established by Article XX only. Therefore, the Trustees may not address disputes concerning Dental Plan benefits.

Opinion of the Trustees

The Respondent is responsible for payment of the covered medical expenses incurred by the Complainants and their eligible dependents during their employment and during their individual periods of eligibility as laid-off Employees, as determined under Article III. D. (1)(a) of the Employer Benefit Plan.