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GUILD MEMBERS TO GET LOWER RATES AND REFUNDS

Arbitrator Rules Sun Overcharged for Dental and Vision Coverage

More than 200 Guild members will see premium cuts – as much as \$18.22 a month – and refunds – up to about \$150 – as a result of a grievance case brought by the Guild.

In the case, an arbitrator ruled that The Sun's increase in dental and vision premium share for employees hired after June 23, 1996 violated the contract. The Sun imposed the additional increases in June.

The case hinged on interpretation of the contract. Under language which has been in effect since 1996, Article 11 of the contract limits increase in premium share to 4 percentage points a year. (For example, if employees are paying 25 percent of premium one year, that can be increased to 29 percent the next year.) Appendix D of the contract allows for higher rates for "newly hired" employees. The Guild said Appendix D applied only to employees at the time they were hired. The Sun argued that it applied to everyone hired after June 23, 1996, when that language came into the contract.

The arbitrator, Richard I. Bloch, said in a ruling late last month that the Guild interpretation was "more persuasive, and ultimately compelling." He wrote, "The finding is that Management violated the Labor Agreement by both the nature and the timing of the adjustments here contested."

The size of the premium savings and refunds depends on your enrollment choices (individual or family, dental PPO or dental HMO).

The savings not only reverse the improper increase in the past, but also extend into the future. If the case had gone the other way, The Sun could have imposed larger increases in future years, and could have applied its logic to medical premiums as well as dental and vision.

The case is a reminder of the value of a union contract. It's a limit on Tribune's worst instincts to reach into employees' pockets to pay more and more of health costs. And it provides for a binding decision from a neutral third party to judge disagreements when they arise.

A second case on health charges – the so-called "fees" for smokers and for coverage of spouses – is also moving to arbitration. An arbitrator has been chosen, and we're in the process of setting a date for the hearing. It will likely be several months before the case is heard, and then more time before a decision is issued. Teamster locals at The Sun and at other Tribune properties are also moving to arbitration on the fees.

-- Bill Salganik