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Middletown Journal

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AT MIAMI UNIVERSITY MIDDLETOWN

AEIF: AK wants to delay talks

Union says it's ready to begin contract negotiations in two weeks

Armco Employees Independent Federation said in its November newsletter that the union is ready to start contract talks within two weeks, but AK Steel Corp. wants to wait until January.

Alan McCoy, AK's vice president, government and public relations, said Thursday that wasn't the case.

"We're open and ready and available at the earliest convenience of the union," McCoy said.

AK invited the AEIF in early 2003 to talks that could have reopened the current collective bargaining agreement. The union later declined.

A contract covering some 2,700 AEIF members working at AK's Middletown Works expires on Feb. 28, 2006.

Brian Daley, AEIF president, could not be reached for comment. But one company observer thinks both sides need to start talks soon.

"If they really want to get it done by Feb. 28, then you start in November," said Michael Locker, a New York City-based steel industry analyst and consultant who has worked for the AEIF.

Talks with a United Steelworkers of America local at an AK plant in Ashland, Ky., had to be extended, Locker noted. That contract expired Sept. 1; an agreement was announced Sept. 26.

"I would say it's a very low likelihood to get it done in two months," Locker said.

An AEIF newsletter, dated Wednesday, said representatives of AK "indicated to us that they will not be prepared to begin discussions until at least the end of November and suggested we conduct business as usual until January of 2006."

Charles Bradford, of New York's Bradford Research/Soleil Securities, believes two months of talks could be enough.

"Usually, a lot of the work on these contracts is done at the last minute anyway," Bradford said.

But he added: "I don't know why the company would want to wait."

McCoy said AK does not want to wait. "We've not said 'January,'" he said.

James Wainscott, AK's chief executive, president and soon-to-be chairman, has said the company needs to tackle labor costs that he argues are too high. He said the company must also address job classifications that don't offer enough flexibility and more.

The AEIF newsletter said AK will rely on G. Randall Ayers, a Frost Brown Todd attorney, as its "chief spokesperson." Daley will be the union spokesman, the newsletter said.

Other members of AK's negotiating team will be Bill Gonce, AK's labor relations supervisor; Tim Perkins, labor relations representative; and Jessica Hicks, assistant labor counsel, the AEIF said.

The union said it will work with its longtime general counsel, Cincinnati attorney Robert Mitchell, as well as professionals who can assist in the "areas of pensions, insurance benefits and others."

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