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STRIKE WILL HURT ALL OF SILVER VALLEY

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United Steelworkers Union Local 5114 unanimously rejected Hecla Mining Company's last and best offer. When Hecla went ahead Monday and implemented the wage and benefit changes it had offered, the workers struck.

Hecla, based in Coeur d'Alene, didn't waste time putting the predicament in perspective.

"The decision by the local union to strike benefits no one," Phillips S. Baker, Jr., Hecla's president and CEO, said in a press release issued first thing Monday morning.

Though he might be reluctant to admit it, union president Phil Epler agreed.

"The longer this goes, the more it hurts everybody," he said.

The standoff means 27 bargaining sessions over some 10 months were basically wasted exercises. Work on the Lucky Friday mine comes to a halt, depriving the company of income. The strike brings employment for some 250 miners to a halt, depriving them and their families of income. Now the waiting game begins, with both sides indicating they're prepared to wait it out over the long haul.

But here's the problem: The lack of work and income represents a serious blow not just to the company and to the miners, but to the Silver Valley as a whole. According to Hecla, Lucky Friday has been an economic boon for the entire region, pumping almost \$1 billion into the Silver Valley economy over the past five years. That works out to about \$3.85 million a week. When you consider the Silver Valley businesses that keep their noses just a little above water even during decent economic times, think about what the loss of several million bucks a week will mean to many merchants.

Strikes happen, and in most cases, they end with both sides conceding more than they'd have liked. It's our hope that this strike doesn't last long, as we agree the lost productivity benefits nobody. The strike might, in fact, force Hecla to move more quickly toward automation and other

advances that will end up displacing some of the striking employees. And it will no doubt hold the company back at the beginning of its 126th year, delaying progress at Hecla's most expensive mine to operate.

In the meantime, those of us in the greater Coeur d'Alene area should feel free to patronize Silver Valley businesses as much as our time and budgets allow. Spring is nearly here, and the Silver Valley offers lots to see and do after just a short drive.

Let's help our neighbors and have some fun at the same time.