

HERE'S HOPING HECLA, MINERS STRIKE ACCORD

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Nobody knows how long the Silver Valley miners' strike is going to last.

But interested parties should at least be able to know some of the key facts in the dispute between Coeur d'Alene-based Hecla and United Steelworkers Local 5114, representing roughly 300 people who work at the 75-year-old Lucky Friday Mine near Mullan.

Mining a mile and even deeper underground can be dangerous, with conditions unsuitable for many people. In addition to skill, there's no small degree of courage that's needed to do these jobs. They should be well-compensated. And they are.

Miners have long been able to pick their own crews and Hecla wants to mothball that system. Hecla asserts the Lucky Friday is losing money, and that the practice of "job bidding" must change for the mine to become profitable again, which can happen only if production costs go down.

According to Hecla's 2016 earnings report, the Lucky Friday spent \$20 million more than it brought in last year. While 2016 was a good year for overall production at the Lucky Friday, it was not the record-breaking year some miners have been claiming publicly. The mine produced 3.6 million ounces of silver last year, compared to 5 million ounces in 2000. It produced about 294,000 tons of ore in 2016, short of the 351,000-ton record set in 2010.

Union leaders have been quoted as saying pay and benefits aren't the main reasons for the strike. However, in communications from miners to The Press, that certainly isn't a universally held assertion.

How does compensation for a miner stack up against other jobs? You decide.

According to a letter Hecla shared with the union in February, the average W2 labor wage at the mine last year was \$84,000. That doesn't include an average of \$33,000 in benefit costs Hecla pays per person. Benefits include 11 paid holidays, vacation, family health care benefits, a 401(k) plan with company match, and a pension plan. Hecla acknowledges skilled tradesmen like mechanics and electricians would see the biggest raises, while entry level positions and others

would see less. The company asserts that contrary to what some miners are stating, there wouldn't be an overall decrease in wages if miners hadn't gone on strike. Production simply needs to increase.

By most companies' standards, Hecla's health care options are extremely competitive. The "gold" plan costs \$238 a month for an employee with a spouse and children, with an annual deductible ranging from \$900 to \$1,800. Preventive care is fully covered; office co-pays are \$20; prescription co-pays are as low as \$10. Some miners have expressed frustration at these costs, but perhaps that's because until now, Hecla has always paid all health insurance costs for its employees.

Almost a year ago, Hecla and the union opened negotiations after a six-year contract had expired. Despite numerous meetings and even federal mediator intervention, the sides didn't reach an agreement — hence the strike.

Just days after the miners struck, the union filed a grievance against Hecla alleging unfair labor practices. A union leader said that was an attempt to get Hecla back to the negotiating table.

For the sake of a good company and good workers, we hope logic and an honest assessment of negotiating strengths and weaknesses leads to a satisfactory resolution soon.