

Local union sues supplier for brokering settlement

International UAW named in lawsuit over layoffs

By Paul Monies, Business Writer

A local union representing former workers of auto supplier Johnson Controls Inc. has sued the company and its international union for brokering a layoff settlement in Louisiana without local input.

The lawsuit, filed Thursday in Oklahoma City federal court, is on behalf of about 250 former workers of Johnson Controls, which supplied seats to the General Motors Corp. factory. GM idled its plant in February, causing more than 700 layoffs at local suppliers.

United Auto Workers Amalgamated Local Union 286 had a labor contract with Johnson Controls that was to expire June 16. The local union claims Johnson Controls failed to honor that contract when GM stopped production, then held settlement talks in Louisiana with officials of the international UAW.

International UAW officials informed the local union of the settlement June 29. About 100 former employees were in attendance.

"At the meeting, the UAW representative threw a memorandum of settlement on a table in the center of the room and told the Local 286 members present, 'This is what you got,' " the lawsuit stated.

The settlement said the local contract ended Feb. 17, four months before it was set to expire. Local union leaders were not allowed to participate in the negotiations, nor did they get the opportunity to vote on the settlement, the lawsuit alleged. That was counter to the UAW's constitution. The settlement also released Johnson Controls from all grievances, including 15 that were pending, the lawsuit alleged.

"Nothing in the settlement was different than what we would have been entitled to under federal and state laws," Dorothy Wheeler, chairwoman for Local 286, said in an interview. "A lot of people didn't even know the international had settled, because I got calls after about how we had no voice."

Local 286 is seeking \$7.5 million in damages, including back pay, benefits and retraining funds.

A spokeswoman with Johnson Controls in Milwaukee said the company does not comment on litigation. A spokesman for the international UAW in Detroit said the union had not seen the lawsuit.

Union workers at GM suppliers typically made less and had less lucrative labor contracts than hourly workers at GM. Most at Johnson Controls had average hourly pay between \$19 and \$20 an hour.

After several frustrating visits to Workforce Oklahoma offices to look for another job, former Johnson Controls employee April Mayes found a temporary job as a bank teller for \$8 an hour. Her husband, Brandon, has been working overtime at Tinker Air Force Base in an effort to make up the family's difference in pay. The couple have two boys, ages 6 and 11.

"I was glad for the union, but in the end, it seems they just cut their losses and went on to the next deal," Mayes said of the settlement.

Another employee, Mary Judd, is going back to school to become a medical coder and transcriptionist. She hasn't received any severance pay or supplemental unemployment benefits because a previous workers' compensation claim is pending.

"I really felt like they pushed us out the door," she said. "It's been hard on so many people. I don't think this lawsuit will change how JCI operates, but it might make the transition easier."

Edmond attorney Craig Pitts, who is handling the case for Local 286, said Johnson Controls should honor its labor agreement. Members also deserved better representation from the

international UAW, he said.

"They were paying dues for more than four years," Pitts said. "The company and the union just punted. Johnson Controls took the low road."

State Labor Commissioner Brenda Reneau said her department received 10 wage claims from former Johnson Controls employees in the past month. So far, four cases have been closed and Johnson Controls has paid more than \$47,600 in severance benefits. Reneau said the department tries to solve wage claims within 45 days, although some take longer because of outstanding medical or workers' comp issues.

Johnson Controls also owns Norman's York International factory, which is nonunion.