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Inkstop's board of directors looking for money to repay workers

By Janet Cho, The Plain Dealer October 07, 2009, 8:04PM
Now that they've paid workers' health insurance premiums for September, InkStop's board of directors is trying to come up with the money for employees' final paychecks.



"I think it's important for everyone to understand that the board is working extremely diligently to get all of the employees paid," said InkStop Chief Executive and co-founder Dirk Kettlewell. He represents the common shareholders on the board, but said he was speaking on behalf of the entire 16-member board.

"The board very focused on this. We're very sensitive to all the issues surrounding this, and we are working very thoroughly to make this happen," he said.

Kettlewell did not provide any details of the discussions or a timetable by which he hopes to announce a solution, but said he could not emphasize enough how much the board wants to make things right for the 450 workers who lost their jobs last Thursday.

But that response didn't satisfy the attorneys for the more than 90 InkStop employees who are suing the company in U.S. District Court.

"The damage has already been done," said attorney Jason Bristol of Cleveland law firm Cohen Rosenthal & Kramer LLP.

Oct. 7: Inkstop pays employees employees benefit premiums

Oct. 6: Inkstop insurance letter to employees

Oct. 5: Inkstop employees file suit against company for unpaid wages, benefits

"It would be wonderful if the company does the right thing, but they've already violated the law, and there are additional payments that the company is liable for."

Oct. 2: InkStop closes all stores

Oct 2: Inkstop letter to employees (PDF)

Attorney Anthony Lazzaro of the Lazzaro Law Firm LLC, which is working with Bristol's firm, said that because the case is in federal court, any payment would have to be approved by the court, which could require additional damages because paychecks were late.

InkStop employed about 450 people at 143 stores nationwide. That number includes nearly 100 people both at stores in Northeast Ohio and at its corporate headquarters in Warrensville Heights.

When InkStop workers learned via fax, e-mail and phone call around 10 p.m. Oct. 1 that they'd been laid off indefinitely, they also found out they wouldn't get their final paychecks because of "cash constraints."

Some lost two weeks pay, others three weeks. All were counting on the money.

"Everybody was looking for their paychecks to pay their bills," said Dwuane Weeden, who worked as an assistant store manager in the Austintown InkStop store for 21 months.

"It's been rough, not knowing until the last minute that you're not going to have your job, not knowing how you're going to pay your bills," he said.

Weeden owes about \$1,300 in mortgage, gas and electric bills he hasn't had the money to pay, and doesn't know how he's going to provide for family without a job.

InkStop employees also learned last week that the company had paid the premiums for their medical benefits only through Aug. 31, and they did not qualify for COBRA coverage.

On Tuesday, InkStop's board sent text messages telling workers that premiums had been paid through Oct. 1, the same day they lost their jobs.

Weeden said that even if the InkStop reopens its stores, he would have a hard time working for the company.