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Labour Officials Intervene In First Caribbean Conflict

By Juan McCartney

Labour officials have intervened in the conflict involving First Caribbean Bank International and the Bahamas Financial Services Union which represents line staff at the bank, an essential move before Labour Minister Dion Foulkes decides whether to grant the workers the authority to strike.

A week ago, members of the union voted overwhelmingly in favour of a strike. Employees had been complaining about the conditions in which they work at the night depository unit at the bank's Shirley Street office.

Last week, the Ministry of Labor started meetings with union members and management after recent head butting.

The union cannot actually strike without obtaining a certificate from the Minister of Labor.

Mr. Foulkes said before it comes to that, he hopes to resolve the conflict.

"One of the reasons why I instructed the Director of Labour [Harcourt Brown] to intervene is that I have to have a proper feel for exactly what the complaint is before I sign off on the final authority in order for the union to strike," he told the Bahama Journal.

"This is what we call a cooling off period. It is designed to ensure that every possible avenue is exhausted before a union goes on strike and that is exactly what we are doing."

The bank's Managing Director Sharon Brown confirmed that a meeting with the Ministry of Labor officials took place last Friday.

"We are reviewing matters and we will continue to dialogue with the ministry and the union in order to seek the best possible outcome," she said.

The BFSU falls under the umbrella of the National Congress of Trade Unions (NCTU).

NCTU president John Pinder said that the issues between the BFSU and the bank's management extend beyond working conditions at the night depository unit.

He claimed that the bank has not been bargaining with the BFSU in good faith on a new industrial agreement.



Management of First Caribbean Bank International and the union that represents line staff workers are meeting with labour officials as they attempt to stave off a strike. Members of the union voted last week overwhelmingly in favour of a strike as head butting continues between the union and management.

"As [for] what was reported to me, the bank is not really compromising anything," he said.

"...They want it their way in a number of the parts of the industrial agreement, especially as it relates to salary and bonuses and the rest of that. The bank is not prepared to do what is necessary to act in an amicable way, so that created a certain level of stress among its members."

However, Ms. Brown refuted those statements.

"I certainly do not share that view or that position. We are, in fact, and have always been, negotiating fairly," she said.

"We have been having regular meetings and we are committed to concluding the industrial agreement as quickly as possible."

Mr. Pinder said that the issues facing First Caribbean relate to the larger issue of allowing foreign banks to operate in the Bahamas' domestic banking market.

"I think this whole situation with this First Caribbean Bank needs to be reviewed. The merger itself was one that was not pleasing to me as an individual Bahamian first of all," he said.

"[You must] consider the amount of revenue that the bank makes from The Bahamas itself – and they choose to put their head office in another district – to the extent where I understand that even stationary supplies has to come all the way from where their headquarters is [located]?"

Mr. Pinder said that the BFSU has the full support of the NCTU and will back any industrial action that is deemed necessary.

A statement released by First Caribbean said that the bank is committed to partnering with communities in the 17 territories in which it operates.

Officials further stated that through the First Caribbean International Comtrust Foundation, the bank dedicates one percent of its prior year profits to community partnership causes each year.

Meantime, Minister Foulkes said meetings thus far have been productive and are scheduled to continue with both parties this week.