# WHO'LL BLINK FIRST AS TEAMSTERS, COCA-COLA PLAY WAITING GAME


About 350 union members have been striking for two weeks after about seven months of unfruitful negotiations and indications showing little signs of thawing by both the parties. Health insurance costs and how it should be shared at the Coca-Cola bottling plant in East Hartford are at the heart of the dispute. Both the Teamsters and Coca-Cola agree that health insurance costs are $14,898 a year per employee at the East Hartford bottling plant. Health insurance costs are a major point of disagreement and it seems hard to see a contract materializing, when both the parties are adopting rigid stances on this matter. Teamsters, who work as drivers, say they earn around $20 an hour, of which health insurance accounts for $7.16 an hour. During their last contract, Teamsters spokesman Chris Roos, said that an agreement had been reached with the management, of what percent of their increase in compensation would go towards wages and what would go towards medical and dental insurance. However, Roos alleges that Coca-Cola retracted its agreement saying that the company bears the entire cost of health insurance and that it was time union members met part of the expense. Roos said that the earlier contract had detailed exactly how the compensation would be divided. It seems that it was detailed so exactly that there was no place for any ambiguity. In the first year, 25 cents went to wages; 35 cents went to health insurance. The following year, 25 cents went to wages, 50 cents went to health insurance, the third year, 50 cents went to health insurance, none to wages. The fourth year, 25 cents went to wages, 40 cents to health insurance. The fifth year, 25 cents went to wages, and 40 cents to insurance. And in the most recent year, 50 cents went to wages, but none went to health insurance. The union said that it had agreed to share the contributions in this manner, instead of insisting on higher wages having payroll deductions for insurance premiums, because that was the way the company favored the deal. The company's preference for this sharing system was also probably hastened by the fact that the company saved money on overtime because workers have a lower wage base. Moreover, companies get tax benefits for spending on health care that they don't get for paying wages. The union said that of the $14,898 a year the health insurance costs, the workers' contribution of the costs is $5,512, or more than 36 percent, and that's in line with employee cost sharing around the country. "There's no doubt about it, it's a Cadillac — a Rolls-Royce — of a health plan," Roos said. "But we pay 36 percent of it." Toney Anaya, a Coca-Cola spokesman said that it was wrong on part of the union to call the split in compensation as "the forgoing of wage increases." The Teamsters Union has asked the National Labor Relations Board to intervene as they feel that the alternate distributing arrangements that the company has made could result in workers getting laid off. "They keep saying no one will lose their jobs, but they won't guarantee no one will lose their jobs," Roos said It also accused the company of maintaining secrecy and not revealing any information regarding its contingency distribution plans. The NLRB investigating the union's claims encouraged both Coca-Cola and the Teamsters to break the stalemate and reach a resolution. John Cotter, deputy regional director of the National Labor Relations Board in Hartford, said that although "we believe there is a potential for merit finding," the agency is not issuing a complaint. No new negotiating sessions have been scheduled since the strike began. The next meeting is on June 12.