



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Inez Austin - Controversy is settled at Hanford, Reprimand, evaluation of whistle-blower lifted

Year

1998

Description

An article about Inez Austin's complaint from the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, December 5, 1990

Body

(An article about Inez Austin's complaint)

A Hanford Nuclear Reservation engineer who said she'd been harassed for being a whistle-blower agreed yesterday to settle the dispute in exchange for a raise and a better performance rating. Inez Austin, an 11-year Hanford employee, agreed to drop a complaint filed with the U.S. Labor Department after Westinghouse Hanford Co. offered her time off and the possibility of a new job with the company, which runs the Hanford reservation for the federal government. Austin said she hoped the settlement will encourage other Hanford workers to voice safety concerns and overcome a long history of harassment of Hanford whistle-blowers. "It's going to

make other people feel like they can go through the Employee Concern Program (to report problems) and it's going to work," she said last night. "I did, and it didn't work out too well."

Austin, 40, filed a complaint with the Labor Department saying she'd been harassed by a Westinghouse supervisor after she refused in June to approve the pumping of two waste tanks containing ferrocyanide, a potentially explosive chemical additive to some tank waste to coagulate solid wastes and allow pumping of liquid from the tanks. Austin told her supervisor that not enough was known about the contents of the tanks and that there was a danger that pumping liquid out of the tank might cause an explosion. Austin said her supervisors yelled at her and that later she was given the lowest work evaluation she'd ever gotten at Hanford. After she abruptly took some vacation time, she was threatened with firing. The two waste tanks were not pumped. But Austin was reprimanded.

After trying without success to get the evaluation changed and the reprimand withdrawn, she sought public media attention last weekend. Austin's lawyer, Tom Carpenter of the Washington, D.C.-based Government Accountability Project, began negotiating with Westinghouse on Monday. Agreement was announced late yesterday. In exchange for Austin's withdrawing her complaint, Westinghouse will withdraw the reprimand, allow Austin to purge her work file of derogatory material, raise her performance rating for the past year and give her a month's paid leave and a salary increase effective the day she returns.

The company said it is not admitting wrongdoing in Austin's case but will investigate how it was handled. Roger Nichols, Westinghouse Hanford president, conceded that the company's system to handle employee concerns "didn't work in this case," despite his own attempts to encourage employees to take their safety concerns as high as his office if necessary. The company agreed to the settlement because it wanted to avoid a long Labor Department investigation and wanted Austin's dispute out of the press, where it "muddied the water," company spokesman John Burke said. "We want to thoroughly investigate all the facts and see if there's something we can learn from this," Nichols said.

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