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SECTION C
INSIDE

▶ Work & Family 2
▶ Stocks 4
▶ Dividends 5

CVSW

USS-POSCO settles race bias lawsuit

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A race discrimination lawsuit that painted an ugly picture of a hostile workplace at USS-POSCO Industries' steel plant in Pittsburg was settled this week.

Originally filed in October 1994, the case had gone to trial a week ago before being settled on the behalf of five black men. Attorneys representing the plaintiffs had sought unsuccessfully to make the case a class action.

Attorney Jonathan Seigel, whose Oakland firm represented the plaintiffs, said the settlement is sealed and

that he could not comment on the case. An attorney for the company did not return phone calls Thursday.

The men said they were harassed and denied promotions because of their race, according to the civil lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court in San Francisco. They said they were called racial epithets, one was warned that "the KKK is in the area" and another was told "blacks are here to be managed, not managers," according to court documents.

The company denies the allegations and sought to have the case thrown out.

The plaintiffs were Michael D.

Hall, Robert L. Darden, Danny L. Douglas, Samuel Anderson McCree III and Harold H. Tubbs Jr. Though they all were employed at the plant a year ago, it was unknown Thursday whether they still worked there.

The lawsuit sought lost wages; attorneys' fees; damages for emotional distress, pain and humiliation; and punitive and exemplary damages. It also asked the company to stop its alleged violations of civil rights and that policies be implemented that would prevent discrimination and harassment of blacks in the future.

The suit did not ask for specific dollar amounts.

The plant processes raw steel into thin steel sheets used for autos, furniture, fruit and vegetable cans and metal studs for home building. Since the mid-1980s, it has been owned in a joint venture between its original owner, U.S. Steel, and South Korea-based Pohang Iron and Steel Co.

As of October 1994, blacks represented 6.4 percent of the 980-person work force at the plant. The plant also employed 185 Hispanics and 30 Asians, but those groups did not appear to be harassed, plaintiffs' attorneys said in an October 1995 interview.

The plaintiffs, some of whom are longtime USS-POSCO employees, say

they were given undesirable jobs, assigned to all-black work teams and failed to receive training provided to nonblack co-workers.

Attorney Robert Carrol, who has assisted USS-POSCO with programs to educate workers and managers about discrimination in the workplace, defended the company's efforts to promote a harassment-free environment at the plant in an interview a year ago.

In the 1980s, USS-POSCO adopted a policy prohibiting harassment based on sex, age, race, religion or disability that complies with state and federal laws, he said. In 1987, the company

also formed a civil rights committee composed of workers and managers that is designed to give workers another avenue for complaints.

Some of the allegations in the lawsuit were investigated by that committee and found to be without merit, Carrol said.

Carrol acknowledged in an interview a year ago that addressing harassment at the plant is an ongoing effort. "This is a steel mill, not a church," he said. "It's a steel mill that's been out there since the '30s. Over the years, the manufacturing of steel and steel products has changed dramatically. The culture is another issue."