

‘We’re ready!’

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HUNDREDS of Barbadians who formerly held policies with Manufacturers Life Insurance Ltd. yesterday made clear their intention to take on their former insurers in court by signing up to be part of the massive class-action suit filed on their behalf.

It was standing room only in the auditorium of Lester Vaughan School, St. Thomas, as close to 800 ex-policyholders thronged the balconies, doorways, windows and steps of the building to hear Canadian Queen’s Counsel Harvey T. Strosberg and members of his legal team address issues such as the eligibility requirements to be part of the suit, the legal procedure that will be followed, and the strength of their case.

Included in the numbers were former Prime Minister Sir Lloyd Sandiford, lawyers, insurance executives, bankers, accountants, educators, and civil servants. An upbeat Strosberg said he was delighted at the size of the turnout and the interest shown in the case. “The fact that all these people showed up and are interested in this lawsuit is significant, because what they’re saying is they want to hire an Ontario lawyer to assert their rights in Ontario,” he said. “We had to find out whether or not that’s what they wanted, and obviously they’ve shown it with their feet.”

The gathering was told that the lawsuit would not negatively impact on Life of Barbados Ltd. (LOB), the company which Manulife sold its 13 621 Barbadian policies to in December 1996. Holders of these policies lost their policy rights, becoming ineligible to benefit from the Manulife’s subsequent demutualisation.

They also heard that participatory policyholders were eligible to be part of the suit against the multi-billion-dollar insurance company, while term policyholders were not.

Strosberg said he was impressed by the “very intelligent, penetrating questions” asked by those who attended, noting that at least one ex-policyholder had even read the actuarial report, which showed that Manulife’s actuaries had indicated to Barbadian regulatory officials that the company had no intention of demutualising. A key aspect of the ex-policyholders’ case is that even as Manulife was communicating this information, it had been actively lobbying the Canadian government to be allowed to demutualise.

While describing the case as “strong”, the high-profile Q.C., who has recovered over a billion dollars for Canadian clients in recent years, stressed: “There are no guarantees. This is a matter that a court will decide, not me. There are no guarantees in litigation.”

Many former policyholders emerged from the information session buoyed by the prospect of receiving compensation if the suit is successful. Winston Jordan, an administrator who held his policy with Manulife since 1968, said that based on the initial information he had received, the case sounded like a worthwhile effort. Jordan, who was among the over 300 Barbadians who had signed up for the suit even before last evening’s session, was heartened by the support of other ex-policyholders.

A claims adjuster in a local insurance company, whose family held four policies with Manulife dating back as far as 1976, said she was “very hurt” when the policies were sold. She was even more hurt, she said, when she learned that the company’s Canadian, American and Hong Kong policyholders were given shares in the newly listed company when Manulife demutualised in 1999, while Barbadian policyholders got none.

Strosberg’s ten-member team of lawyers, researchers and assistants is looking at appointing a Barbados-based attorney to facilitate communication with class members here.

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