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1 P R O C E E D I N G S

2 (11:08 a.m.)

3 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: We will hear
4 argument next in Case 13-1010, M&G Polymers v. Tackett.

5 Ms. Ho.

6 ORAL ARGUMENT OF ALLYSON N. HO

7 ON BEHALF OF PETITIONERS

8 MS. HO: Thank you, Mr. Chief Justice, and
9 may it please the Court:

10 A promise of unalterable, costly healthcare
11 benefits should be negotiated at the bargaining table,
12 not imposed at the courthouse. In a series of cases,
13 the Sixth Circuit has required courts to infer from
14 contractual silence a promise of vested benefits.

15 JUSTICE GINSBURG: But the -- we're dealing
16 with a case where there isn't silence. I mean, it's a
17 matter of construing what the words mean, but for
18 example, this collective bargaining agreement says that
19 the employees will receive a full company contribution
20 toward the cost of health benefits. That's not silent.

21 MS. HO: Your Honor, respectfully, it is
22 silent with respect to the duration of the full company
23 contribution toward benefits. The word "receiving,"
24 which I understand Your Honor to be focusing on,
25 indicates that the individual has to be retired; in

1 other words, and actually receiving a pension and
2 receiving benefits. It's not -- it's not a durational
3 term. And so --

4 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: That's what you say, but
5 there was a hearing by the district court. You're
6 recommending we apply ordinary contract principles.

7 MS. HO: Yes. There's -- there's no
8 disagreement and the courts of appeal don't -- don't
9 disagree that ordinary contract interpretation
10 principles apply.

11 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Assume -- assume that I
12 find those words ambiguous, you have a hearing. The
13 district court had a hearing, and it didn't -- I don't
14 think the district court relied on a presumption. It
15 relied on a bevy of evidence, including the fact that
16 your company bought the predecessor company, assessing
17 the health contributions at full value for retirees.

18 Why -- why wouldn't ordinary contract
19 principles permit the district court to do exactly what
20 it did here?

21 MS. HO: Justice Sotomayor, I want to go
22 back to -- to the first part of your question which
23 said, well, wasn't -- wasn't there a trial here? And
24 our position is that it never -- it never should have
25 gotten to that because the district judge initially, as

1 a matter of law, looked at the contract language here,
2 declined to apply Yard-Man, and said, I don't find a
3 promise of vesting.

4 On appeal, the Sixth Circuit said, we
5 disagree. Under Yard-Man, there is at least an
6 inference of vesting here and instructed the district
7 judge to apply Yard-Man on remand, which the district
8 judge did, and on page 20 of Petitioner's appendix, in
9 the opinion on remand, the district judge says, "Those
10 directives," meaning the Sixth Circuit's directions in
11 Yard-Man, "require this Court to reach the conclusion
12 that the plaintiffs here obtained vested benefits."

13 JUSTICE KAGAN: Ms. Ho, I'm wondering if you
14 would agree with this. If we could start all over
15 again, forget all the history that you just said, if we
16 could start all over again, you, I think, just agreed
17 that we would use ordinary contract principles; is that
18 right?

19 MS. HO: Correct.

20 JUSTICE KAGAN: Okay. So ordinary contract
21 principles, we would -- first, we would look at the
22 agreement, and if the agreement said something clearly
23 either way, whether it was for vesting or against
24 vesting, the agreement would control; is that correct?

25 MS. HO: That's correct.

1 JUSTICE KAGAN: And if the agreement was
2 ambiguous, we could take extrinsic evidence to clarify
3 the terms of the agreement; is that correct?

4 MS. HO: Objective extrinsic evidence, yes,
5 that's correct.

6 JUSTICE KAGAN: Okay, so --

7 JUSTICE SCALIA: You acknowledge that? See,
8 I wouldn't acknowledge that if I were you.

9 MS. HO: Well, Your Honor, I'm --

10 JUSTICE SCALIA: You don't believe in the
11 parol evidence rule?

12 MS. HO: Objective -- objective extrinsic
13 evidence, Your Honor, would be -- in other words,
14 admissible -- admissible on a finding of ambiguity.

15 JUSTICE KAGAN: Custom, practice.

16 MS. HO: But I -- but I think it's
17 important, Justice Kagan, if I may, to point out that in
18 the Sixth Circuit, and I think this is one way in which
19 what happened here departs from ordinary contract
20 determination, is that in the Sixth Circuit, the
21 inference applies of vesting based either on text or --

22 JUSTICE KAGAN: Yes, I hear you.

23 MS. HO: -- or extrinsic evidence.

24 JUSTICE KAGAN: Yes, I hear you. I was not
25 getting you to agree with Yard-Man and I was not getting

1 you to agree to the Sixth Circuit.

2 MS. HO: Certainly, Your Honor.

3 JUSTICE KAGAN: Yes. But what -- what I
4 want to -- is you look at the text, if the text says it
5 either way, you go with the text; if the text doesn't
6 say it either way, it's permissible to look at extrinsic
7 evidence, like, the practice of the parties and, you
8 know, what you sold this for and things like that.

9 MS. HO: Well, I -- I would agree with you
10 up to a point, and I think where -- where I might part
11 company or maybe add to that discussion would be to say
12 that ordinary contract interpretation does say, I think,
13 in McCutchen this Court referred to that, in
14 Stolt-Nielsen this Court applied the principle that
15 where a contract is silent, courts apply the relevant
16 default principles; in other words, silence -- I just
17 want to make clear that silence doesn't always equal
18 ambiguity. And our position --

19 JUSTICE KAGAN: Well, but then you get to
20 Justice Ginsburg's question, don't you, which is that
21 this is a case where actually the parties are disputing
22 language. It's not really a case where there is
23 silence. I mean, you've come in and you've given some
24 language that's very good for your side, which is that
25 duration clause, and the other party has come in and

1 focused on the word "receiving" and focused on the tying
2 arrangement between this and pensions, and focused on
3 the surviving spouse clause. So you have -- you have
4 some language, they have some language.

5 MS. HO: Well, I think, Your Honor, at a
6 minimum, that's why we're entitled to reversal and a
7 remand, if this Court declines to require a clear
8 statement as -- as part of -- as part of ordinary
9 contract interpretation. I think we would at a minimum
10 be entitled to have -- have that look --

11 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Where does --

12 MS. HO: -- at the language without the
13 Yard-Man inference.

14 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Where does -- where does
15 ordinary contract interpretation require a clear
16 statement?

17 MS. HO: Certainly, Your Honor, we think --
18 we think ordinary contract interpretation says where
19 there is -- where there is silence here, and there is no
20 durational term, there's no indication of vesting,
21 there's no indication of how long the full company
22 contribution should last, that where there is silence,
23 as this Court did in McCutchen, this Court looks to see,
24 well, what are the operative default rules that -- that
25 we assume that if the parties didn't contract around --

1 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Well, you keep saying
2 when there is silence, and as Justice Kagan pointed out
3 and as I pointed out, one side is not silent. There are
4 always indicia that vesting was intended.

5 MS. HO: I think there -- there is
6 silence -- there is no question that there is silence in
7 the operative term of the promise, which is a full
8 company contribution toward healthcare benefits. It's
9 true that the other side has pointed to various textual
10 cues that I think, if anything, Justice Ginsburg,
11 underscore the lack of such terms in the one place in
12 the contract where we would expect it to be. And that
13 is in the --

14 JUSTICE KENNEDY: But I thought your
15 position here was that what the contract says under
16 ordinary principles of contract interpretation is not
17 the point. The point is, is that in the first court of
18 appeals case, they mention Yard-Man at least four times
19 and said the Yard-Man presumption controls, and that's
20 what the district court thought.

21 MS. HO: Yes.

22 JUSTICE KENNEDY: And the question -- the
23 principal question here is whether the Yard-Man
24 presumption should have a -- play a significant part in
25 the interpretation of this contract, and you say no.

1 MS. HO: Correct.

2 JUSTICE KENNEDY: And there would be -- and
3 presumably there would be -- we could make that decision
4 in remand so that we don't interpret this contract
5 initially without -- without the benefit of what the
6 district court and -- and the court of appeals would say
7 without the Yard-Man presumption if you prevail.

8 MS. HO: Certainly, Your Honor.

9 JUSTICE SCALIA: Unless, of course, the
10 Yard-Man presumption is normal contract interpretation.
11 That is, you know, the court of appeals could be saying
12 that when you look at the totality of the contract where
13 the benefits are being given for, as payment for work,
14 you get them if you've worked so many years, they
15 increase when you've worked more years. Where that is
16 the case, it is a reasonable assumption, call it a
17 presumption if you like, that any promise to pay those
18 benefits continues after the termination of the -- of
19 the union contract. In other words, I'm not sure that
20 the court of appeals would agree that -- that this
21 presumption is contrary to normal contractual
22 interpretation. I think the court of appeals would say
23 that is normal contractual interpretation.

24 MS. HO: Justice Scalia, I think there's --
25 I think you're right that the Sixth Circuit would and

1 has said that all it's doing in these cases is applying
2 ordinary contract interpretation. I think as Judge
3 Sutton and others have pointed out, saying doesn't make
4 it so. And I think there can be no question when you
5 look at the -- when you look at the cases, and I think
6 this case is a good example of the work that Yard-Man is
7 doing. And Yard-Man itself, Justice Scalia, in a
8 footnote in its opinion, acknowledges that ordinary
9 contract interpretation rules apply with respect to
10 interpreting the contract generally. But with respect
11 to the issue here, which is the duration of the
12 contract, the Sixth Circuit itself in Yard-Man said that
13 the normal "strictures," was the word used, doesn't
14 apply.

15 So I think at least as an initial matter,
16 the Sixth Circuit did not conceive of this as ordinary
17 contract interpretation and that it's really its own
18 policy-based rationales for why it's appropriate, in a
19 sense, to put a thumb on the scales here in favor of
20 retirees.

21 But I think if you look at the rules, maybe
22 that's the most clear way to see that it's not ordinary,
23 is saying to courts you can look at text or extrinsic
24 evidence. That's not normal contract interpretation.
25 To say to courts you can ignore a contract duration

1 clause if it doesn't specifically refer to retiree
2 health care benefits.

3 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Well, we know that
4 contracts have certain assumptions about them, about
5 what continues. Arbitration provisions continue after
6 the expiration. We have found that, correct?

7 MS. HO: Correct. In the labor context,
8 that's correct, whether the labor --

9 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: And Justice Scalia just
10 said to you something that talks about retirement and
11 the surviving spouse and her right to get things would
12 -- I think could reasonably leave you as a vesting
13 provision.

14 MS. HO: I would respectfully disagree with
15 that, Justice Sotomayor, for two primary reasons: I
16 think the first reason is that all of these other
17 textual cues are reasonably read in conjunction with the
18 contract, both with the contract expiration clause,
19 which says that the benefits are for the duration of the
20 agreement; but even without that clause, are read in the
21 context of the background rule --

22 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: See, that's --

23 MS. HO: -- with respect to the terms
24 expiring with the agreement.

25 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: -- the question for the

1 following reason. I don't know whether there's a
2 lifetime health benefit if this company stops providing
3 any, meaning if the company some day says we're not
4 going to give any whatsoever, the issue -- that, I
5 think, is a more interesting question because then the
6 contract has truly expired. But if it chooses to, it
7 seems to me that the full benefits or -- will receive a
8 reduced -- will receive a full company contribution,
9 could suggest that that doesn't expire.

10 MS. HO: We --

11 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: So long as the health --
12 as long as the company is providing health insurance.

13 MS. HO: Our position is the full company
14 contribution language, as the district judge in this
15 case initially held when looking at that language, does
16 not have a durational term that's not sufficient to
17 imply vesting. In this particular case, and I think
18 Your Honor raised the issue of the term of the agreement
19 and applying during that, in terms of going forward, I
20 just want to be clear, we have never sought to terminate
21 the benefits, and, in fact, now the retiree benefits are
22 the subject of mandatory bargaining --

23 JUSTICE GINSBURG: But could you have -- if
24 the collective bargaining agreement has expired, you
25 have your duration clause, and the company instead of

1 saying, retirees, we're going to make you contribute
2 something to the health care, says: Well, the contract
3 expired; no health coverage at all for retirees. Under
4 your theory, I assume they could do that.

5 MS. HO: Well, under ERISA, where Congress
6 said, unlike pension benefits, we're not going to
7 require health care benefits to vest, the only way --

8 JUSTICE GINSBURG: But the fact --

9 MS. HO: -- the only way the benefits vest
10 is by contract.

11 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Is it your position that
12 once the contract expires, the employer is free to say
13 no health coverage for retirees, period?

14 MS. HO: If there has been no vesting, yes.
15 In this case, the company, each successor company and
16 the union, entered into a series of agreements --

17 JUSTICE SCALIA: But you answered the
18 question. The answer is yes, right? The company can
19 terminate. You're saying it hasn't terminated here,
20 it's a nice company; but it doesn't have to be a nice
21 company, does it? Isn't that your position?

22 MS. HO: Our position --- I'm just trying to
23 be consistent with the record in this case, Your
24 Honor -- is as a general matter, yes, the terms don't
25 outlast the terms of the agreement, but there is a

1 difference in this case.

2 JUSTICE SCALIA: What I would like to hear,
3 earlier you said there were two reasons: One was the
4 termination clause and second that the contract had to
5 be read in light of the background rule -- then you got
6 cut off. And I really want to know what the background
7 rule you were about to refer to was.

8 MS. HO: Certainly, Your Honor. I think
9 there are two background rules in play here. And the
10 first rule is that we don't normally read into silence
11 where parties have undertaken extra-statutory
12 obligations or extraordinary undertakings. We don't
13 read those terms into silence. We expect that if such a
14 serious undertaking as a promise of health care benefits
15 for life were to have been made, that we would expect to
16 see it, just like this Court said in the Tern case about
17 --

18 JUSTICE SCALIA: What's the second one --
19 before you get cut off again, what's the second one?

20 MS. HO: Certainly. And I think the second
21 background rule here is related to the first. And
22 that's the extra-statutory obligation here, that where
23 Congress has said in ERISA, it's explicitly exempted
24 welfare benefits from automatic vesting. So, if the --
25 in other words, what's being asked for here is the

1 exception to the rule. So we would expect to see that
2 clear in the contract.

3 JUSTICE KAGAN: Ms. Ho, Congress has said,
4 yes, in pension benefits, there's vesting. And in
5 health care benefits we leave it to the parties; is that
6 right?

7 MS. HO: That's correct.

8 JUSTICE KAGAN: So it doesn't have any
9 implication for health care benefits other than we leave
10 it to the parties, isn't that right?

11 MS. HO: I would respectfully -- maybe I
12 would not so much disagree as take that a step further.
13 I think it does have an implication here because it
14 establishes a default rule that, unless as a matter of
15 contract there is an agreement to vest, then the
16 benefits otherwise do not vest. And I think we would
17 expect, applying normal contract principles, would
18 expect to see that clear on the face of the contract.

19 JUSTICE KAGAN: Well, but then you're back
20 to your first background rule, which is that we would
21 expect to see this if it were there. But you can -- I
22 mean, that seems -- that statement has its corollary,
23 right? Which is that, you know, either party -- we
24 would expect, we would expect to see if the union had
25 won, that it would say vested. We would expect to see

1 if the employer had won, it would say unvested.

2 And, indeed, I think that there's an amicus
3 brief in this case that suggests that there was a survey
4 done of all these agreements and about 60 percent of
5 them say quite explicitly unvested. Yours doesn't do
6 that. So there we are. We're left with this ambiguity,
7 and you have some language and they have some language
8 and some judge has to figure it out.

9 MS. HO: Well, and I think -- I think your
10 question raises two issues, one of which goes back to
11 our previous discussion about the role that ERISA has to
12 play here. And I think if you put the onus on the
13 employer to say what's clear, you're in a sense saying,
14 even though Congress doesn't require it to be vested,
15 we're going to ask --

16 JUSTICE KAGAN: Congress has said we don't
17 care. Congress has said we leave it to them.

18 MS. HO: Right, but there's no obligation to
19 do it. So normally we would expect to see the
20 obligation on the party who wants the benefit to seek
21 the clear language, to seek the promise, as opposed to
22 the party who doesn't. And I think if you sort of play
23 that out in terms of as a practical matter, particularly
24 in the context of negotiations, one would also expect to
25 see the party who wants the benefit bargaining for the

1 benefits.

2 JUSTICE ALITO: This is an important benefit
3 and an expensive one. Why is it that in this collective
4 bargaining agreement and apparently many others -- I
5 don't know whether the figure is 40 percent or whatever
6 it is -- there isn't anything explicit one way or the
7 other?

8 MS. HO: I think --

9 JUSTICE ALITO: This certainly can't be
10 something that didn't occur to the employer or to the
11 union. Why did they choose to leave it silent? Why did
12 they choose not to address it expressly?

13 MS. HO: I think one could consider that
14 they didn't express it directly or one could read the
15 contract as saying there simply is no -- silence says
16 there is no promise of vesting here, because that is an
17 extraordinary obligation for a company to take on.

18 JUSTICE GINSBURG: How about "Retirees will
19 receive health benefits as long as they are eligible for
20 and receiving a monthly pension"? Doesn't that sound
21 like as long as they're getting the pension, they will
22 get health benefits?

23 MS. HO: No, Your Honor. Again, read in
24 conjunction with either the express clause in this case
25 or the background rule that the terms expire with the

1 agreement, that doesn't indicate that those -- those
2 extend. And I think what -- what the Sixth Circuit has
3 done, and it did in this case, it instructed this Court
4 that the mere fact that the retiree healthcare benefits
5 were tied to receipt of a pension was sufficient to
6 indicate vesting. I think that essentially undoes what
7 Congress did in saying you -- you have to vest in
8 pension; you don't have to vest in the welfare context.

9 The Sixth Circuit essentially puts those
10 things --

11 JUSTICE SCALIA: Well, I don't think it's
12 reversing that. I think it's -- it's an argument of --
13 of contractual expression, contractual intent. It says
14 if you tie the continuing receipt of health benefits to
15 the continuing receipt of retirement benefits, and if
16 you know that retirement benefits survive the
17 termination of the contract, right? You acknowledge
18 that.

19 MS. HO: The vesting.

20 JUSTICE SCALIA: It seems to suggest that --
21 that health benefits continue as long as retirement
22 benefits do. Now, I mean, maybe there are other
23 indications, but that one certainly seems to -- seems to
24 tie health benefits to retirement benefits.

25 MS. HO: I don't think so, Your Honor.

1 Because I think one con- -- one consequence of that is
2 essentially no matter what the parties contract or agree
3 to, you're always going to have vesting, even though
4 it's the exception and not the rule, simply by tying the
5 healthcare benefits to -- to retirement status.

6 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Why do you have to -- why
7 do you have to do that? If you want to treat them as
8 separate, treat them as separate. Don't tie them
9 together. There was nothing that required these two to
10 be tied together.

11 MS. HO: Well, Your Honor, I think the
12 practical reason for -- for linking those two is not to
13 indicate vesting, but to ensure that the recipient is --
14 is actually retired for purposes of receiving the
15 benefits.

16 JUSTICE KENNEDY: Well, I thought it was
17 your position that whatever might be the outcome of
18 these questions, the Sixth Circuit didn't think that
19 that was the right analysis, that the Sixth Circuit
20 didn't think the result could be reached without
21 imposing the presumption of your argument, and so
22 instructed the district court. And that's the issue
23 before us.

24 MS. HO: That's correct, Your Honor. And
25 the district court -- and the district court made clear

1 on remand, and the Sixth Circuit in the second appeal,
2 in Tackett II, explicitly approved, and the word the
3 Sixth Circuit used was "presumption," that the district
4 court decided correctly in applying the presumption to
5 this case.

6 JUSTICE GINSBURG: I thought that the
7 district court on remand said it would have come out the
8 same way anyway. They said there are no facts that
9 would defeat this same conclusion.

10 MS. HO: Correct, Your Honor. And I -- and
11 I think that's an important response to what Justice
12 Sotomayor was pointing out earlier about the fact that
13 there was a trial here. I think that -- that language
14 makes clear that the trial here was about what -- what
15 vested, and that's the district judge making clear that
16 whatever facts there had been, it would have reached the
17 same conclusion about vesting, which is the only issue
18 before this Court based on the Sixth Circuit's
19 directive, as Justice Kennedy was pointing out, to apply
20 Yard-Man and to apply the Yard-Man presumption.

21 JUSTICE SCALIA: You know, the nice thing
22 about a contract case of this sort is you can't feel bad
23 about it. Whoever loses deserves to lose.

24 (Laughter.)

25 JUSTICE SCALIA: I mean, this thing is

1 obviously an important feature. Both sides knew it was
2 left unaddressed, so, you know, whoever loses deserves
3 to lose for casting this upon us when it could have been
4 said very clearly in the contract. Such an important
5 feature. So I hope we'll get it right, but, you know, I
6 can't feel bad about it.

7 (Laughter.)

8 JUSTICE BREYER: Well, you know, the workers
9 who discover they've been retired for five years and
10 don't have any health benefits might feel a little bad
11 about it.

12 MS. HO: And -- and Your Honor, I -- I
13 agree.

14 JUSTICE BREYER: I'm taking sides, but I
15 want to --

16 (Laughter.)

17 JUSTICE BREYER: I mean, what I've listened
18 to sort of drives me to the conclusion where you
19 started, decide these things without any presumption,
20 period. Ordinary contract. Go read the contract.
21 Where it's ambiguous, Judge, ask them for extrinsic
22 evidence if they want to present it. Decide it like any
23 other case. I started there. Maybe I've heard
24 something that should change my mind. I often do change
25 it in oral argument, but I haven't yet.

1 MS. HO: And -- and --

2 JUSTICE SCALIA: He agrees with you, doesn't
3 he? I mean, you're not going to argue that, are you?

4 MS. HO: No, Your Honor.

5 JUSTICE BREYER: So you say just have us
6 decide it, and in this case, I've read an awful lot that
7 you may well lose.

8 MS. HO: Well, I would -- I would -- I would
9 say this -- this, Your Honor. There's no disagreement
10 that ordinary contract interpretation principles apply.
11 I think the -- the dispute is over, number one, how the
12 Sixth Circuit applied them in this case, and it used the
13 Yard-Man presumption, which we disagree with. But I
14 think under -- under either sort of -- however much
15 clarity is required in these contracts, I think in this
16 case you only get to a promise of vested benefits by
17 reverse engineering language elsewhere in the agreement
18 that only highlights the lack of it where you would most
19 expect to find it, and that ignores the contract
20 expiration clause here, which makes clear it's a full
21 company contribution during the term of the agreement.

22 And if I may reserve the rest of my time for
23 rebuttal.

24 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you, counsel.

25 MS. HO: Thank you.

1 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Ms. Clark?

2 ORAL ARGUMENT OF JULIA P. CLARK

3 ON BEHALF OF RESPONDENTS

4 MS. CLARK: Mr. Chief Justice, and may it
5 please the Court:

6 As the Court has so aptly noted, this is a
7 contract dispute, and our argument is simply that
8 contract disputes relating to retiree health benefits
9 should be decided like every other dispute under a
10 collective bargaining agreement. To determine what the
11 parties intended without applying any presumptions --

12 JUSTICE BREYER: Isn't that what Justice
13 Scalia believes? I tend to agree with him. He said --
14 he said the other side is arguing the same thing, and --
15 and says since both sides want to argue the same thing,
16 maybe we can just agree with them.

17 (Laughter.)

18 MS. CLARK: That's music to my ears, Your
19 Honor.

20 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Well, it may be
21 music, but it -- Yard-Man says that retiree healthcare
22 benefits are not subject to the stricture of ordinary
23 contract interpretation and -- I mean, that's what
24 Yard-Man says, and so I think you would have to vacate
25 if we're going to say apply the normal principles of

1 contract interpretation.

2 MS. CLARK: I have two answers to that. Let
3 me start with what Yard-Man actually did. If you read
4 the entire opinion, and unfortunately it's rather long,
5 it details a number of contract provisions in that
6 contract which the Court found supported the intention
7 of both parties to create a benefit that would last
8 beyond the expiration of the collective bargaining
9 agreement.

10 There was, for example -- and this is kind
11 of the -- the most obvious contrast, the retiree benefit
12 was described with some words like "continues." The
13 benefit for the surviving spouse of a retiree was stated
14 to continue as long as this contract is in effect.

15 Now, the Court took that, rightly so, to
16 suggest that the retiree would have a lifetime benefit,
17 but that a surviving spouse, who was still alive after
18 the retiree died, would continue to have benefits until
19 the next agreement -- I'm sorry, the agreement, because
20 it kept -- it kept rolling forward in agreements. So
21 the surviving spouse was limited to the term of a
22 contract while the retiree was not.

23 There are a number of other contract
24 provisions that they note, which very clearly supported
25 the inference that the retiree's benefit was intended to

1 continue.

2 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Well, I know you're
3 saying that you win without Yard-Man, but -- but it
4 still seemed to mean something to the Sixth Circuit.
5 And the many other courts of appeals that have addressed
6 the question have distinguished what they're doing,
7 saying, you know, we're not going to follow Yard-Man.
8 We're going to apply normal principles of contract
9 interpretation.

10 MS. CLARK: And, Your Honor, that was where
11 I was getting to the second piece of my argument -- the
12 second piece of my answer to your question. And that is
13 that we believe, particularly based on the limited
14 arguments that were made by Petitioner below, that this
15 Court could affirm this decision on normal principles of
16 contract interpretation, but if the Court wants to be
17 sure that the judgment below is, in fact, based on
18 normal principles of contract interpretation, we are
19 perfectly comfortable with a remand for that purpose.

20 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Now, the only point of
21 this that I'm unsure of is that almost all of the other
22 circuits require either a clear statement of vesting or
23 at least words clearly susceptible to vesting. One or
24 the other. How do you stand on those two principles of
25 statutory --

1 MS. CLARK: Number one -- well, number two.
2 I'm disagreeing with both parts of your -- of the
3 premises of the question.

4 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: I'm saying what other --
5 I think other courts have done this, correct? They have
6 presumptions against vesting, some of the courts.

7 MS. CLARK: Some may. Skinner Engine is
8 really the only one that flatly says we're going to ask
9 for clear and express language. Even they will consider
10 extrinsic evidence for the purpose of demonstrating an
11 ambiguity. The Skinner Engine opinion itself says that
12 it would consider that; it just found the evidence in
13 that case not sufficient.

14 But among the other circuits, I count five
15 that apply traditional rules of contract interpretation
16 and that only say -- not clear language, not specific
17 language -- but say only we are looking, as in all other
18 contract cases, for some language that is reasonably
19 susceptible to the interpretation that's offered by the
20 retirees. And that's the classic formulation. It's the
21 one that we urge this Court to adopt. And indeed --

22 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Is that -- is that the
23 Second and Seventh -- are you saying essentially you
24 agree with the position of the Second and Seventh
25 Circuits?

1 MS. CLARK: The Second Circuit, Justice
2 Ginsburg, in the opinion in *Joyce v. Curtiss-Wright*,
3 articulated that precise standard. It then, in a kind
4 of a summary of its opinion, used the word "specific
5 language," which has come to be cited to mean something
6 more than language reasonably susceptible. To that
7 extent we would not agree with the Second Circuit. As
8 far as they went, relying on traditional principles, we
9 agree with them.

10 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Is it a traditional
11 principle of contract interpretation that if you're
12 dealing with something as big a deal as health benefits
13 for life, you might expect that to be addressed --
14 addressed more specifically?

15 MS. CLARK: Mr. Chief Justice, no. There
16 are many contract provisions that are a bigger deal than
17 this. I mean -- and it is not the traditional rule of
18 contract interpretation that the courts look to see
19 which party had a bigger stake and punish them if their
20 language is ambiguous. Quite the contrary, it's treated
21 like any other issue of contract interpretation: Is the
22 language reasonably susceptible to more than one
23 interpretation?

24 JUSTICE KENNEDY: You want us to write an
25 opinion saying that whether or not health care benefits

1 survive in a collective bargaining agreement is not a
2 big deal?

3 MS. CLARK: No, Justice Kennedy, that's not
4 what I'm saying.

5 JUSTICE KENNEDY: Well, then I'm thinking --
6 I don't understand your answer to the question --

7 MS. CLARK: I'm simply --

8 JUSTICE KENNEDY: -- posed by the Chief
9 Justice.

10 MS. CLARK: I am saying that there are many
11 contract issues that come before the courts that are a
12 big deal. This is one of them, particularly for the
13 retirees. It is a big deal. But the point is simply
14 that traditional rules of contract interpretation don't
15 treat ambiguity any differently when it is in a contract
16 provision that's a big deal for one side or the other,
17 or both sides.

18 JUSTICE KENNEDY: But that's exactly
19 contrary to what your argument instructs.

20 MS. CLARK: Justice Kennedy, I think not. I
21 think that the -- the essence of the Yard-Man inference,
22 and that's the term that the court used, is not that
23 different from what this Court recognized in the Nolde
24 Brothers case and in the Litton case, which is that
25 there are some terms in collective bargaining agreements

1 which by their nature are offering -- may be; let me
2 rephrase -- by their nature may be offering something in
3 exchange for service that's already rendered. So if the
4 performance is complete on one side and all that remains
5 is for the other side to keep its end of the bargain,
6 the Court in Litton and in Nolde recognized that those
7 promises, as a normal rule, will continue. They will
8 not expire when the rest of the agreement expires.

9 And accordingly the Court, dealing with an
10 issue of severance pay in Nolde, where all that there
11 was in the contract was a promise that there would be
12 severance pay proportional to years of service, said
13 that when the employer closed the plant after the
14 contract expired, that there was a possibility that that
15 severance pay was intended still to be paid to people
16 who had earned it, and therefore ordered arbitration of
17 the dispute.

18 In Litton, the question was whether when the
19 plant laid off a number of workers after the contract
20 expired, was the employer obligated to arbitrate over
21 the question whether seniority should have protected
22 people in those layoffs. The Court reached the
23 conclusion that there was not the same kind of character
24 of deferred compensation about layoffs, seniority in
25 layoffs, as there was in the notion of a severance pay

1 that people may have earned over time.

2 So the Court was ready without any explicit
3 language in the contract, without any presumption, to
4 say this is an issue that has to be determined by the
5 processes that are normally applied to determine
6 ambiguous contract promises. Does this promise --

7 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: That's the general
8 principle of what custom or practice in the industry or
9 something like that, which I guess -- I guess that's an
10 ordinary principle of contract interpretation that could
11 be applied.

12 MS. CLARK: Mr. Chief Justice, it certainly
13 is one of the principles that this Court has said must
14 be considered in the case of all collective bargaining
15 agreements. Transportation-Communications Union said
16 practice, usage and custom should always be considered
17 for interpreting collective bargaining agreements, and
18 we are fully behind that.

19 JUSTICE SCALIA: Is there a practice on
20 this -- on this subject?

21 MS. CLARK: Yes, there is evidence of a
22 practice on this subject, Justice Scalia. The -- in
23 this case -- there are two things. One is the sales
24 agreement, which Justice Sotomayor pointed out during
25 the Petitioner's argument, where --

1 JUSTICE SCALIA: Okay, I'm not talking --
2 I'm talking --

3 MS. CLARK: Okay.

4 JUSTICE SCALIA: -- about in the industry.

5 MS. CLARK: Okay. In the industry in
6 general, this is -- this is rubber industry language.
7 You will see it in many of the reported decisions that
8 come out of the Sixth Circuit that -- because there were
9 a number of rubber companies headquartered in Ohio. And
10 the combination of "the retiree will receive health
11 benefits" combined with "and the surviving spouse will
12 receive them until death or remarriage," is a very
13 common formula in the --

14 JUSTICE SCALIA: Yeah, but Sixth Circuit we
15 can't rely on because of Yard-Man.

16 MS. CLARK: Well, Your Honor, I would say,
17 number one, that those two provisions combined certainly
18 do say a lot about the duration of the promise that the
19 employer was making. The sales agreement here
20 specifically reflected that the credit on the purchase
21 price which M&G received was calculated based on
22 actuarial assumptions that these were lifetime benefits
23 with no retiree contributions.

24 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: This may be an unfair
25 question, but following up on what Justice Scalia is

1 getting at, I don't know how many others of those rubber
2 companies are requiring contributions of active
3 employees that are different than the contributions of
4 retired employees. Do you have any information about
5 that?

6 MS. CLARK: I do not, and it's certainly not
7 in this record.

8 So the second -- the second point of
9 practice --

10 JUSTICE KAGAN: Please.

11 MS. CLARK: The second point of practice
12 that I want to point out is this: The 1997 collective
13 bargaining agreement omitted all reference to retiree
14 health benefits for people who had retired before
15 January 1, 1996. So beginning in '97 and in 2000 you
16 have a collective bargaining agreement which says people
17 who retire 1-1-96 and after will receive the following
18 health benefit. The record is undisputed that, even
19 though the contract was silent beginning in 1997, the
20 employer continued to pay retiree healthcare benefits to
21 those people who retired before 1997, and indeed that
22 liability was transferred from Shell to M&G as part of
23 the sale.

24 That is a point that we made. It's
25 undisputed. Petitioner did not respond to it in any

1 way. So we do have that kind of evidence of what the
2 parties have done under this agreement.

3 JUSTICE KAGAN: And is it right that
4 Petitioners' original arguments were not that they
5 didn't have to pay these at all, but only that these
6 benefits were capped at a certain level; is that right?

7 MS. CLARK: That is correct. And, indeed,
8 that was the issue that -- on which the company moved to
9 dismiss the complaint in the first instance. It was the
10 issue on which the district court initially dismissed
11 finding that there were cap letters that limited the
12 amount that the employer had to pay; that, when it was
13 tried before the district court, the district court
14 rejected all of that evidence on credibility grounds and
15 found that, based on the credibility of the witnesses,
16 this was a lifetime obligation which everybody had
17 understood until the employer found a way to try to
18 reduce its costs, and --

19 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: I'll give you a question
20 about retirees. I don't know if it's industry standard
21 or just this contract. Are retirees eligible to vote on
22 the agreements that are entered into by the union?

23 MS. CLARK: They are not.

24 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: They are not.

25 And is that generally true of retirees?

1 MS. CLARK: Generally, that is true because
2 they are not members of the bargaining unit once they
3 retire, and only members of the bargaining unit are
4 represented in bargaining or have any right to vote on
5 the ratification of an agreement.

6 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: And do they -- does the
7 union represent them in any other disputes they may have
8 as retirees with -- because generally, the union
9 represents employees, active employees?

10 MS. CLARK: Yes, it does. It is the agent,
11 and that in the statutory term, as well as the common
12 law term, for the employees in the bargaining unit.
13 Once an individual retires, the union is no longer his
14 or her agent. The union no longer has any authority nor
15 any obligation to represent the retiree.

16 JUSTICE SCALIA: So -- so in a way, you
17 would expect the union to give this away so -- so it can
18 get higher benefits for the people that are still in its
19 bargaining unit, wouldn't you?

20 MS. CLARK: That is one of the concerns.

21 JUSTICE SCALIA: Well, that's a cynical --

22 MS. CLARK: No. That -- that, indeed, is
23 one of the things that Yard-Man points out, is that --
24 is that that is a reason to assume that the parties
25 would want to make this clear in the agreement.

1 JUSTICE SCALIA: Right, right.

2 MS. CLARK: And -- and, in fact, you know,
3 to -- to be clear, there are agreements in which the
4 union and the employer agree in advance that the
5 retirees will have these benefits until and unless the
6 union and the employer bargain something else. And
7 that's just a different species of contractual vesting.
8 There is a condition. It's imposed at the time of
9 retirement. The benefit is paid consistently with that
10 condition.

11 There are, at the opposite end of the
12 spectrum, agreements, and I tried a case in which this
13 was the -- this was the understanding. When the retiree
14 went out the door, that package of benefits was exactly
15 what that retiree was going to have for the rest of his
16 or her life. No changes permitted by any means
17 whatsoever.

18 And -- and so the span and the spectrum of
19 contractual vesting in this area is very broad. And our
20 point to you is to say there is no one-size-fits-all
21 solution here. It is what the parties agreed to. And
22 if there is ambiguity in the collective bargaining
23 agreement, as there plainly was here with provisions
24 that could be read on each side, then it goes to the
25 processes which the common law has established over

1 hundreds, if not thousands, of years to say we're going
2 to consider the entire agreement.

3 We don't compartmentalize some other
4 provisions in the agreement and say, oh, wait a minute,
5 they don't have anything to do with this. If they give
6 a clue about what the parties had in mind with respect
7 to the retiree health benefits, they must be considered.
8 They must all be put into the mix of what the Court will
9 determine.

10 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Is -- is one of -- is one
11 of the ingredients that goes into this mix the
12 background rule that I -- I thought your friend would
13 bring up, and that is it is the normal rule in contract
14 interpretation that when the contract expires, so do its
15 terms. If you start with that, contract expires, all
16 its terms expire. Isn't that --

17 MS. CLARK: This Court addressed that in
18 Litton. And the clear ruling of the Court there was
19 that exceptions to that rule are determined by normal
20 contract interpretation.

21 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Well, what about the
22 arbitration context of Litton? I mean, the idea is,
23 well, of course, it doesn't expire because you might
24 have disputes, particularly disputes going in connection
25 with the expiration. So the idea in Litton, that the

1 arbitration requirements continue, really can't be
2 applied outside that context.

3 MS. CLARK: Certainly, to the extent that
4 Litton says we're going to presume that the arbitration
5 promise continues, that does not apply here.

6 But the second level of consideration in
7 Litton, you know -- so the first question was the Court
8 says arbitration, we're going to presume it continues
9 unless the parties have made it very clear that it
10 doesn't, so that it can kind of clean up all the
11 disputes under the parties -- that -- that the parties
12 have.

13 But then the second layer was is the
14 particular contract provision in dispute here, there the
15 seniority provision that I mentioned a moment ago, the
16 kind of contract provision that we believe may have some
17 post-expiration binding effect on the employer. And the
18 Court contrasted Nolde, in which it was severance pay,
19 noting that that was in the nature of a deferred
20 compensation claim, and also pointed out that if a
21 particular contract right may be deemed to have accrued
22 or vested while the agreement was in effect, it would
23 normally remain in effect.

24 JUSTICE KAGAN: So is this the language
25 you're referring to, "Exceptions are determined by

1 contract interpretation, rights which accrued or vested
2 under the agreement will, as a general rule, survive
3 termination of the agreement"?

4 MS. CLARK: That is one of the passages that
5 we're referring to. We're also referring to a passage
6 on page 203 of the Court's opinion, which says, "A
7 similar duty, i.e., a constraint on the employer after
8 the expiration date," which is the sentence before, "may
9 arise as well from the express or implied terms of the
10 expired agreement itself." Express or implied.

11 JUSTICE KAGAN: Go back to something that
12 you said earlier that I wasn't sure I understood from
13 reading the briefs. You said that this was a standard
14 form contract that arose in Ohio for rubber companies;
15 is that right?

16 MS. CLARK: That's close. I mean, the
17 rubber industry bargained as a group. There were a
18 number -- and there were pattern bargaining. It was
19 just common in a number of industries, you know, one
20 large employer might be the lead company in a round of
21 bargaining. And Goodyear was involved, as you know, in
22 the early contracts here.

23 So there's a bargaining with one big
24 employer, and it sets a pattern. And then the other
25 companies in the industry bargaining with the same union

1 may adopt that pattern. And that goes for wages and --
2 and all of the economic terms of the agreement, as well
3 as benefits and working conditions and everything else
4 in the contract.

5 This language about retiree health benefits
6 shows up in a large number of the rubber contracts, and
7 because they were headquartered in Ohio, not to be
8 surprising, they -- they --

9 JUSTICE KAGAN: And did these contracts
10 arise before or after Yard-Man?

11 MS. CLARK: These -- the initial contracts
12 were pre-Yard-Man. They've obviously been renegotiated.
13 For instance, the 95-point rule in this agreement was
14 post-Yard-Man. I mean, it was bargained to --
15 previously, it was somebody with at least 10 years of
16 service gets 100 percent paid, and they made that a
17 little bit less generous for people who are hired after
18 the change was made. They adopted the 95-point rule
19 with -- as you know, it's proportional to that for
20 people with less than 95 points in age and service.

21 So it's -- there -- changes were made, but
22 the basic pattern of retiree gets these benefits with a
23 full company contribution, the language about the
24 retiree receiving a pension, which, in my mind, very
25 plainly does speak to duration, as does surviving

1 spouse, until death or remarriage. I don't know how you
2 read those words to mean anything other than duration.

3 So there is enough in this contract to
4 support the interpretation that the retirees placed on
5 it. The Court properly tried the case, received
6 extrinsic evidence, ruled that it was, indeed, a
7 lifetime promise. If this Court has any doubt whether
8 traditional principles of contract interpretation were
9 applied without presumptions, as I said earlier, we
10 would be willing to welcome a remand for a determination
11 under traditional principles of contract interpretation.

12 If the Court has no further questions, I
13 believe that concludes my argument.

14 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you,
15 Ms. Clark.

16 Ms. Ho, you have four minutes remaining.

17 REBUTTAL ARGUMENT OF ALLYSON N. HO

18 ON BEHALF OF PETITIONERS

19 MS. HO: Thank you, Mr. Chief Justice.

20 Three points: First, I think at a minimum
21 we're not hearing a lot here today defending Yard-Man.
22 I think there can be little serious question that
23 Yard-Man infected every aspect of the proceedings below.
24 Indeed, it was dispositive. So I think at -- at a
25 minimum we're entitled to -- to a vacatur and remand for

1 ordinary contract principles to be require -- to be
2 applied.

3 We think that requiring clarity is
4 consistent with those principles, but even as a matter
5 of sort of what -- what Respondent has suggested in
6 terms of reasonably susceptible, the standard that
7 Justice Sotomayor mentions, I think it will be important
8 if this Court remands for consideration of ordinary
9 contract interpretation, that it's clear that what the
10 Sixth Circuit has been doing under that banner is
11 anything but; that looking at putting text on a par with
12 extrinsic evidence is not ordinary contract
13 interpretation; that ignoring contract expiration
14 clauses, unless they specifically reference healthcare
15 benefits, is not ordinary.

16 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: I'm not sure that's
17 true. I --

18 MS. HO: Respectfully --

19 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: The language of vesting
20 has to be reasonably susceptible from something in the
21 contract.

22 MS. HO: Correct, Your Honor. We -- we
23 absolutely agree with that, and we -- and we believe
24 here the full company contribution language, which is
25 the promise at issue, that's the language that the Sixth

1 Circuit looked at.

2 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: But the contract as a
3 whole.

4 MS. HO: In other words, a full company
5 contribution toward healthcare benefits, when read in
6 conjunction with the contract's expiration clause, it
7 says for the duration of this agreement.

8 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: How about the spouses?

9 MS. HO: We believe that those -- those
10 provisions indicate when the benefits would -- would --
11 would cease; in other words, until death, until
12 remarriage. And if anything, Justice, they highlight
13 the absence of such language in respect to the promise
14 to retirees where ordinary contract interpretation would
15 tell you if -- if -- if a promise were made, that's
16 where it would have been made.

17 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Are you saying it does
18 continue as to the spouse? I didn't get the point.

19 MS. HO: No, Your Honor. Our point -- our
20 point is that the benefits are for the term of the
21 agreement until death or remarriage, both events that
22 can happen during the term -- during the term of the
23 agreement. And in all events, Your Honor, that's not
24 language that the Sixth Circuit looked at or considered
25 in making its determination here that the benefits

1 vested based on the Yard-Man presumption and inference.

2 So at a minimum we believe that we're
3 entitled to a vacatur and remand for the Court of
4 Appeals to apply proper principles of contract
5 interpretation in the first instance.

6 If there are no further questions.

7 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you, counsel.

8 The case is submitted.

9 (Whereupon, at 12:00 p.m., the case in the
10 above-entitled matter was submitted.)

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