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Former La-Z-Boy employees seek class-action lawsuit for wrongful termination

By Pamela Manson
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Tom Ammons says he was known for his fast and good-quality workmanship when he was an upholsterer at the La-Z-Boy Inc. plant in Tremonton.

But after more than 21 years on the job, Ammons was fired in 2001. He alleges the dismissal came the day he was scheduled to fill out workers' compensation forms for injuries caused by lifting and flipping heavy furniture over and over.

"That was devastating to me," said Ammons, now an energy conservation specialist for Brigham City.

For former La-Z-Boy employee A. Cameron Sycamore, the pain started in his wrists when he was in the frame assembly department and spread to his shoulders when he switched to upholstering 100-pound couches. Eventually, after undergoing four operations, he was fired.

On Tuesday, lawyers for a group of former La-Z-Boy employees filed a motion seeking to have their wrongful-termination suit declared a class action. That designation would allow Sycamore and others to join as plaintiffs. Nearly 30 ex-workers already have filed affidavits alleging they were unfairly discharged after suffering on-the-job injuries and asking to be part of the suit.

Ammons already is a plaintiff in the suit, which was filed in U.S. District Court in Salt Lake City. The legal action claims La-Z-Boy harassed workers who were injured on the job, then either fired them or put them in a position that forced them to quit.

Kathy Liebmann, a La-Z-Boy spokeswoman, said the company does not comment on pending litigation. La-Z-Boy has denied the allegations in court filings.

Lauren Scholnick, a Salt Lake City attorney for the workers, said claims were "horribly mishandled" by the company.

Court briefs allege La-Z-Boy, which was self-insured, was telling its third-party adjuster to deny claims and refuse treatment. Workers allege they were discouraged from applying for benefits and assigned tasks they were physically unable to perform so they could be fired.

And their injuries were caused by an unsafe work environment, the ex-employees contend. Many claim they were discouraged from reporting industrial injuries and taking off enough time to fully recover.

Ammons says a rail that moved furniture was so short that recliners had to be lifted and stacked on top of each other, sometimes even four high, when the assembly line backed up. In 2001, management got rid of "finalers," employees at the end of the line, making completed products back up even more, he claims.

In his affidavit, Freddy Hernandez says he cut a finger on a frame staple, an injury that allegedly left him infected with a form of flesh-eating bacteria and a disfigured hand.

Back at work, he was assigned to work on the upholstery line, which required him to stretch fabric and squeeze the trigger of a manual stapler. Hernandez said he finally was forced to quit his job because of the pain.

Carpal tunnel injuries were common, according to the employees. However, one worker wrote that management seemed to believe the condition didn't exist and "you'd be putting a bull's-eye on your back" by filing a workers' compensation claim.

The proposed class would include those employees whose employment was severed from April 2000 to the present and within one year of exercising or attempting to exercise their rights under the Utah Workers' Compensation Act. The number of potential plaintiffs among the approximately 700 former workers is unknown.