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Mechanic fired days after woman gets hurt in elevator

Worker was dismissed for drinking on the job before accident, company's lawyer wrote in e-mail

By BILL MURPHY
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Days after a woman was critically injured in an elevator accident two months ago, the company that built and serviced the elevators fired the mechanic assigned to maintain them in a downtown Houston building.

Fujitec fired the mechanic because a contractor hired to inspect the elevators saw him drinking beer in the 717 Texas building four days before the accident, said Philip Werner, a lawyer representing Fujitec.

The contractor arranged to conduct the inspection on a different day — an inspection that occurred before Deborah DeRouen was injured in the Dec. 9 accident, Werner said. No problems with the elevator car involved in her accident, he said, were found during the inspection.

"Fujitec's investigation to date does not reveal that there was a relationship between the drinking and the incident involving Ms. DeRouen or the second incident," Werner wrote in an e-mail.

Carleen Naumann, a sales representative, was injured — she said she broke her vertebrae — and a business executive suffered minor injuries in a second elevator accident in the Hines-owned 717 Texas building on Jan. 12.

DeRouen spent more than seven weeks in St. Joseph Hospital being treated for a fractured vertebrae and compound leg fractures.

Company policy violated

Stephen Boutros, a lawyer retained by DeRouen and Naumann to sue Fujitec and Hines, said he was skeptical that drinking did not play a role in the Dec. 9 accident since Fujitec fired the mechanic just days after De-Rouen was injured.

In coming months, Boutros said he will try to learn if the mechanic had a pattern of drinking at work.

Fujitec fired a second elevator mechanic who was drinking beer with the 717 Texas mechanic, but the second mechanic worked on elevators in another building, Werner said.

Werner said Fujitec fired the mechanics because they violated a company policy prohibiting drinking on job sites.

The drinking, he said, may have occurred shortly after the mechanics had finished work for the day.

Open records request

"There is no indication at this time that there was any drinking by the Fujitec mechanic on the day that the inspection was done," Werner said in an e-mail. "In the absence of any indication that the mechanic involved was drinking on the day of the inspection, we have no reason to believe that alcohol was a factor affecting the quality of the inspection."

Information about the mechanics' drinking in the building owned by Hines was found in e-mails obtained by the Houston Chronicle through an open records request.

DeRouen's accident happened when she entered a car on the 27th floor, and it fell to the 23rd before slamming to a halt. The other accident also happened after the two passengers got in on the 27th floor, in another elevator car, and it dropped abruptly to the 25th floor.

Tenants concerned

"Wow, I'm shocked," he said. "I am glad that (Fujitec) has fired that inspector. I hope that Hines and Fujitec will ensure this never happens again."

Mary Ryan, who works in the building, said of the mechanics' firing: "It is frightening. I would like for Hines to tell the truth in working with their tenants."

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Hines referred questions about the mechanics' drinking to Fujitec.

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AmericanCitizen wrote:

Fujitec is most likely using this mechanic as a scapegoat IMO. I would look further at the equipment if it isn't too late to get an unbiased inspection. I used to work on elevators when I was a kid and something about this just doesn't smell right to me.

2/23/2009 9:44:37 PM

(28)

Recommend: (70) (1)

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Starchaser wrote:

Good gosh! What a nutball.

2/23/2009 8:31:31 PM

(3)

Recommend: (31) (9)

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Gnrdude wrote:

Hey JEd lets go have a Couple Beers before we Work on the Elevator!! YUH YUHH.

2/23/2009 8:54:27 PM

(119)

Recommend: (30) (14)

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fixer wrote:

Read the article people. It clearly states he was seen drinking a beer along with a fellow mechanic AFTER work by a lawyer days before the inspection. I wonder if the lawyer was fired since he was in the same bar in the building he worked in after work? Should every case he has ever lost be in question now since he has a drink on occasion after hours in a bar located in the same building as his office? Obviously this is a case of a lawyer making any excuse he can for a lawsuit. It has already been reported in this paper what the cause was. In case you don't remember it was a bad bushing/bearing in the governors causing them to trip when they shouldn't. Bascially two mechanics lost thier jobs for having a beer together after work only because a manufacturing design flaw surfaced right after a five year full load test. This was the first time for the elevators to be inspected with a full load and the safties (emergency braking device) set sice they were installed. Hines has the final say in who the inspector is and no where in the story does it say he was fired or was seen drinking. Even if he did have a beer with the mechanics after the day was done that would not be out of the ordinary nor a reason to shift blame from design flaw to personel.

2/24/2009 12:08:15 AM

(0)

Recommend: (28) (0)

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FiscallyConservative wrote:

One of two possible scenarios here:

1. Political correctness run amok;
2. A company desparate to shift blame.

(0)

Since when does beer consumption four days before an accident constitute ANY contributing factor to the accident??? Only in the event it was so extensive the company must have turned a blind eye to it.

2/24/2009 1:53:51 AM

Recommend: (23) (0)

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