

The Baytown Sun

2nd employee sues ExxonMobil for alleged cult

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The ExxonMobil Corp. is facing a second lawsuit filed by a former Baytown Olefins Plant employee alleging she was fired because she resisted pressure from supervisors and co-workers to join a “New Age religion.”

In a written statement, an ExxonMobil spokeswoman said an internal investigation of the allegations conducted at the time found them without merit.

The lawsuit, filed last month in a Harris County civil court, states that Cynthia Foster, 46, of Baytown, was a lab technician at the BOP plant since 1980.

According to the lawsuit, in September 1998, Foster’s immediate supervisor, Elaine Scharold, arranged for Foster to be sent for a “day of pampering” on her birthday that month.

The lawsuit states that when Foster, who is Christian, went to the appointment, she learned that “it was a type of indoctrination for a new age religion.”

The complaint alleges that when Foster went to the appointment, she first learned that Scharold and other co-workers in the lab adhered to “certain spiritual, religious teachings of an individual named Alix Rodwell, that included a practice known as ‘Reiki.’”

On a Web site of an organization called the International Center for Reiki Training, Reiki (pronounced “Ray-key”) is defined as “a technique for stress reduction and relaxation that allows anyone to tap into an unlimited supply of ‘life force energy’ to improve health and enhance the quality of life.”

The site says that while Reiki is “spiritual in nature,” it is not a religion.

Rodwell is a Houston woman who advertises herself as a “teacher and healer” in several area metaphysical magazines and on her own Web site. Reiki is one of several techniques that she practices.

The lawsuit claims that between September 1998 and her termination on May 17, 2002, Foster was subjected to “routine, unrelenting coercion by Scharold and other co-workers to become a part of this religious cult.”

The complaint alleges that Foster had expressed concerns about the “Reiki group” to Exxon management during an investigation of complaints made by Lisa Irwin Macuba, another former BOP employee.

The lawsuit states that in January 2002, Foster’s work schedule was changed so that she had to work four days on duty and four days off. On May 17, 2002, she was fired, ostensibly for performance mistakes. The lawsuit alleges that the reasons given for her termination were pretext for discrimination against her for not subscribing to Rodwell’s “religious teachings.”

The lawsuit also states that William McCracken, a former BOP contract worker, stood up on Foster’s behalf and complained to senior Exxon management, only to be fired.

McCracken filed a lengthier but substantially similar lawsuit in a Houston federal court on Dec. 16, nearly two weeks before Foster’s lawsuit was filed. Neither ExxonMobil nor Kelly Services (the contract employer for whom McCracken worked) has yet filed an answer to that lawsuit.

The Foster lawsuit alleges that ExxonMobil discriminated and retaliated against Foster on the basis of her religion, in violation of the Texas Commission on Human Rights Act and the Texas Labor Code. It asks for unspecified damages, including compensatory and punitive damages, and attorney's fees.

Foster's Houston attorney, Dana LeJune, said Thursday that she and McCracken "are not religious fanatics. They simply are just Christian folks who got in the middle of a hornet's nest. They wanted to be left alone, and their employer wouldn't stop (the Reiki group)."

McCracken declined to comment on the advice of his attorney, Charles Jeremiah. Jeremiah could not be reached for comment Thursday.

In a written statement, ExxonMobil Baytown operations spokeswoman Tricia Thompson said the company does not comment on the specifics of pending litigation.

"It is noteworthy, however, that the media received notice of the legal filing. ExxonMobil has not yet been served," the statement reads.

"Ms. Foster was an employee of the ExxonMobil Chemical Company from 1980 until 2002. ExxonMobil takes employee complaints seriously. An internal investigation was conducted of this matter, and the allegations were found to be without merit," it reads.

With an employment base of approximately 6,500 employees — regular and contract — ExxonMobil is Baytown's largest employer.

More than 7 billion pounds of petrochemical products are manufactured each year by the three local ExxonMobil chemical plants. The combined taxes paid to local and state government is more than \$74 million a year.

For more information contact Jim Pannell and Joe Drexler