Kleen, O & G Sued For Safety Violations In Deadly Blast

John Christoffersen, Associated Press Writer

NEW HAVEN, Conn. (AP) — Two workers injured in a power plant explosion filed a lawsuit Monday alleging that proper safety procedures were not followed, and an attorney said that included live electricity running through the site, workers welding and a gas-fueled torch heater running when the blast happened.

The enormous blast ripped apart the nearly completed Kleen Energy Systems plant Feb. 7 in Middletown as workers for O&G Industries Inc. purged a natural gas line. Six workers were killed and 20 were injured.

"Our investigation to date has revealed evidence of a substantial breakdown in safety procedures at the time in question," said Paul T. Edwards, attorney for the injured workers.

The lawsuit filed in Hartford Superior Court says workers were not warned that the gas being purged could not be contained.

"Not only was that protocol not properly executed, but there was a general sense of confusion among the workers that day as to what was going on," said Joel T. Faxon, another attorney representing the workers. "There was simply no communication from those in charge. This tragedy was 100 percent preventable."

The lawsuit, which names O&G, Keystone Construction and Maintenance Services and Kleen Energy Systems, contends the companies failed to contain the natural gas being purged and negligently allowed it to escape, ignite and cause the explosion. The suit, which seeks more than $15,000 in damages, says the purging procedure was not properly supervised.

"Keystone's sympathies continue to be with our employees and their families as well as the employees of other companies impacted by this terrible tragedy," said Nancy Sterling, a Keystone spokeswoman.

She said the company has not had a chance to review the lawsuit and can't comment on it but that Keystone is continuing to cooperate with authorities on the investigation.

A spokesman for O&G declined to comment on the lawsuit. An e-mail seeking comment also was sent to Kleen.

The lawsuit was filed on behalf of Timothy Hilliker of Glastonbury and Harold Thoma of Bolton, electricians who suffered head injuries, loss of consciousness and severe pain, according to the lawsuit.

Hilliker remains hospitalized while Thoma is home, Faxon said. He said Thoma was thrown across a parking lot.

The men suffered post-concussion syndrome, Faxon said. He compared the experience to soldiers injured by explosive devices.

Authorities are continuing to investigate the cause of the blast and whether there was criminal negligence.

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