

Cintas, Widow Reach Settlement In Dryer Death Suit

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TULSA, Okla. (AP) — The widow of a Cintas Corp. worker who died after falling into an industrial dryer in Tulsa has settled her wrongful death lawsuit against the nation's largest uniform supplier, according to federal court records.

Thursday's settlement with the Cincinnati-based company came four days before a federal trial was to begin in Tulsa.

Details of the settlement were confidential and attorneys for Amalia Diaz Torres said they could not comment on the case.

Heather Maley, a Cintas spokeswoman, also could not comment on the case, but said the company "looks forward to continuing our initiatives to become world class in safety."

In the lawsuit, Torres claimed the company's plant managers knew about — and even encouraged — the dangerous working practices that led to the death of her husband, Eleazar Torres-Gomez, in 2007.

Cintas had denied the allegations, saying it never put profits above worker safety.

Both sides had struggled to find common ground in the high-profile labor case, and tried unsuccessfully to settle it through court-ordered mediation.

"To me, it has been very difficult," Torres told The Associated Press Thursday in Spanish. And I know that for my children it has been difficult.

"More than anything, it's like reliving the death of my husband," she said of the prolonged legal fight.

Cintas, which supplies and launders uniforms for restaurant and hotel employees and other workers, employs more than 34,000 people. It posted sales of nearly \$4 billion in fiscal 2008.

On March 6, 2007, Torres-Gomez, a seven-year Cintas employee, climbed onto a slow-moving conveyor to clear a jam of wet laundry, instead of shutting off the machinery as he was supposed to do.

He jumped up and down on the clump and fell into the 300-degree dryer. Twenty minutes later, another employee heard his burned body banging around in the dryer and made the grisly discovery.

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In 2008, an Associated Press investigation found that in the year and a half after the accident in Tulsa, at least eight Cintas plants in six states had been cited by the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration and state authorities for hazards similar to those that led to Torres-Gomez's death.

In December 2008, the company agreed to pay almost \$3 million in penalties to resolve federal occupational safety violations in six cases, including the Tulsa death.

"He was a great dad," Torres said of her husband, who was the major breadwinner in the family of six. "He would play with them, kiss them and hug them, and now, I do it.

"But I know they still need their father's love," she said Thursday, her eyes welling with tears.

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