Mazda Forced To Pay Family For Worker Suicide

Yuri Kageyama, Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — A Japanese court on Monday ordered automaker Mazda to pay 63 million yen ($770,000) in damages to the parents of an employee who was ruled to have committed suicide over depression from being overworked.

Japan, a workaholic nation where people often take pride in suffering in silence, has been plagued with deaths of overworked people, some resorting to suicide and others dying from exhaustion.

Mazda Motor Corp. said it was disappointed that the court in the southwestern city of Kobe had rejected its assertion that the 25-year-old employee's 2007 death was not work-related. It will review the details of the ruling before deciding whether to appeal, the automaker said in a statement.

"We feel it is extremely regrettable to have lost a precious employee," the Hiroshima-based maker of the RX-8 sports car and MX-5 Miata roadster said in a statement following the ruling. "We offer our condolences from the bottom of our hearts."

The worker, who has not been identified because of the stigma in Japan associated with suicide, was a buyer who lived in company housing and was depressed from being overworked, according to Yutaka Kikui, the lawyer for the worker's parents.

The worker was repeatedly ridiculed by his bosses in front of co-workers as a failure who racked up unnecessary overtime, adding to his stress, Kikui said.

The damages awarded Monday follow a condolence payment from Mazda and a 2009 government labor office decision that also ruled the death work-related, allowing the parents to receive other compensation, Kikui said.

The latest damages plus the other payments give the parents the entire 110 million yen ($1.3 million) they demanded in their lawsuit filed against Mazda in 2008, according to Kikui.

Deaths caused by overwork are so common in Japan that the nation has created the word "karoshi," meaning "exhaustion death," usually caused by a heart attack or stroke. Companies can be held liable in such deaths.

In the fiscal year ending in March 2010, the Japanese government found about 100 karoshi deaths. It also ruled that 63 suicides were caused by overwork.

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