

Complaint details alleged conditions at AIG-FP

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It may not have had the Wall Street "boom-boom room" that New Canaan's Susan Antilla wrote about, but sexual harassment was prevalent at AIG Financial Products in Wilton, according to a lawsuit filed last week.

Two female executives have sued AIG for sex discrimination in a suit filed in U.S. District Court in Hartford on Feb. 19.

Susan Potter and Deonna Taylor allege they were "subjected to adverse terms and conditions of employment, including being fired because of their age and sex."

The suit says that out of about 108 vice presidents employed by AIG, only 12 were women.

Potter and Taylor said Joe Cassano, former chief executive officer of AIG-FP, generally promoted a "boys club" atmosphere. On one occasion, the suit alleges, Potter was going to hire some temporary help and Cassano said he, "did not want anyone working here who looks like my ---ing aunt."

Another time, the complaint says, a managing director and significant rainmaker at AIG-FP said, "When is AIG-FP going to get rid of these fat asses and get in some sweet young things?"

The suit says the managing director also was appointed as the 'go to' person for complaints of sexual harassment, and lists men in the company who allegedly discriminated or turned a blind eye when the women would complain. Eventually, Potter and Taylor went to a human rights organization and when the company found out, they were terminated, according to the complaint.

AIG said it wouldn't discuss the details of the complaint or confirm the number of female executives it employs. This newspaper received a statement that says, "AIG denies it discriminated or retaliated against these plaintiffs. AIG prohibits discrimination on the basis of age, sex or any other protected category and is committed to providing employees with a workplace free from unlawful discrimination and retaliation."

The only defendant in the suit is AIG the company. But in what appears to be a public relations move to discredit the case, Cassano spoke out regarding the allegations. Cassano directed his attorney, Jim Walden of Gibson Dunn, to release selected e-mails to Bloomberg News and Reuters that purport to show Potter thanked him for her bonuses. The e-mails were from 1996 and 2002.

The one e-mail from Taylor he supplied to the news media was a goodbye note from March 2008, in which she remembered one good review with him saying it was a gratifying moment for her when "you told me I and the rest of the research team had really hit the ball out of the park -- not an insignificant remark coming from you."

Although Cassano was named in the suit as a person who contributed to the atmosphere at AIG, he is not a defendant. Yet, Cassano's attorney sent this newspaper a statement that says, "FP had many capable women at all levels who thrived under Joe's supervision, including these plaintiffs . . . that they would now turn around and accuse Joe of tolerating, let alone encourage chauvinism is shameful, but the truth will come out in court."

The women's attorney, Deborah McKenna of Outten & Golden, an employment discrimination law firm, said she found the move nothing more than an attempt to deflect the negative scrutiny that has surrounded Cassano regarding what he knew about the toxic derivatives that AIG sold, and led to a \$180 billion taxpayer bailout.

"It is unfortunate that someone not directly involved in this suit is trying to intervene, selectively disclosing e-mails that are completely out of context, seemingly in a meager attempt to better his own sullied reputation," McKenna said.

Because AIG claims the terminations were part of a restructuring, McKenna said her clients have been afraid. After the move that Cassano made this week, which she believes was at his own discretion and not encouraged by AIG, she's interested in what other evidence Cassano has that he didn't disclose to reporters.

"We look forward to getting all of the facts through the discovery process, including e-mails from Mr. Cassano that he may have found not to his advantage to disclose," McKenna said. "At this point, we are trying to shelter the two women who filed these complaints, because the history at AIG suggests that they might be subject to some sort of retaliation."

The job hunt has not gone well for either of the women. Taylor has been out of work since October 2008 and Potter since the summer of 2009, but they have been looking.

"Even under normal circumstance it's difficult to find work in this economy, but with the lawsuit they are worried that it could have an even greater negative impact on their ability to find a job," McKenna said. Yet they intend to stick to their convictions and pursue this case to trial.