

Minnesota: Worker denied restroom break sues Electrolux

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17 March 2014

A Minnesota woman is suing her employer, Electrolux Home Products, over events connected to a denial of a restroom break that caused her to urinate in a box while on the assembly line. Her lawsuit is just one example of the relentless drive by the capitalist class to extract ever-greater production from its workers.

Lily Prince is a 51-year-old woman from Cold Spring, Minnesota, who works at Electrolux's St. Cloud factory making steel liners for freezers. Prior surgeries have left her intestines smaller than usual and resulted in her having to use the restroom frequently. On August 2, 2012, at 12:45 p.m., Prince asked her assembly line leader to cover her so that she could go to the bathroom, but was denied. She asked again at 1 p.m., and her lead told her that "he didn't have time to give me a bathroom break," according to an interview Prince gave to the *StarTribune*.

At 1:15 p.m., Prince saw her manager head toward the break room. She explained that "I assumed he was totally dismissing me, and wasn't going to give me a bathroom break. I got panicky and I didn't know what to do and I didn't want to pee in my pants at work." As a result, at 1:25 p.m., she put a plastic bag in an empty box, walked to a garbage can near the assembly line, and urinated into the box. Electrolux fired her the next day for a "health and safety violation."

Prince was unemployed for the next 11 months, struggling to make ends meet and living in a trailer park, before an arbitrator ruled that Electrolux wrongly fired her. She now works the third shift and does not have restrictions on bathroom breaks. She is suing for back wages and discrimination. Her lawsuit alleges that other workers at the St. Cloud plant have been denied restroom breaks, and refers specifically to a different woman at the plant who relieved herself in a bucket

after being denied a break.

Electrolux, a Swedish company, is the second largest household appliance manufacturer, by revenue, in the world. In 2011, its revenues exceeded \$100 billion, and its profits were \$2.64 billion. Figures from the same year show that it employed more than 50,000 people. The company has resolved several complaints over the last decade at its St. Cloud plant that it does not allow sufficient breaks for its Muslim workers to observe their religious duties.

In recent years, Electrolux has taken advantage of its ability to manufacture globally to drive down labor costs. In 2004, it moved part of its production in St. Cloud to China. In 2011, 1,300 workers in l'Assomption, Quebec, lost their jobs when Electrolux shifted operations from there to Memphis, Tennessee, where it could pay workers one-third less. It is currently threatening to move Italian operations to Poland unless workers agree to drastic cuts in wages and benefits. Workers at the plant in St. Cloud are represented by the International Association of Machinists, which has no such international strategy to protect workers.

Prince's lawsuit is not alone in Minnesota. On February 28, 2014, Chia Tasah filed a lawsuit against Fairview Southdale Hospital alleging that his employer denied him additional bathroom breaks needed because of diabetic medications he takes. Two complaints were filed with the Department of Labor and Industry in 2013 specifically citing bathroom breaks. In 2008, a Minnesota judge determined, as part of a class action lawsuit, that there were 1.5 million shortened or missed rest breaks at Walmarts and Sam's Clubs from 1998 to 2004. His findings noted that one employee suffered "the humiliating experience of soiling herself while at work because she was not permitted to use the restroom."

The denial of bathroom breaks is part of the never-ending drive to increase worker productivity. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) recently reported that nonfarm labor productivity increased by a 1.8 percent annual rate during the fourth quarter of 2013, which follows a 1.3 percent increase from the fourth quarter of 2012 to the fourth quarter of 2013. Productivity in manufacturing increased 5.2 percent from 2000 to 2011 according to the BLS. A 2013 release by the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) showed that productivity for production/nonsupervisory workers increased 240.9 percent between 1948 and 2012.

Worker compensation has not seen any comparable increase. The same EPI report showed that real hourly compensation only increased 107.8 percent during the same 1948-2012 period, with almost all of those gains occurring between 1948 and 1972. Other recent reports have noted that 95 percent of all income gains from 2009 to 2012 went to the top 1 percent.



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