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Great Lakes Cheese Co. workers' lawsuit alleges overtime violations at Hiram plant

Hiram plant accused of overtime violations

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Plain Dealer Reporter

One of the country's largest cheese manufacturers systematically underpays its employees, according to a lawsuit filed by workers at the company's headquarters plant in Hiram.

The complaint says that Great Lakes Cheese Co. rounded down employees' start times to the nearest half-hour and did not pay them for time spent changing into and out of equipment and uniforms required for their jobs.

The workers are trying to get the case certified as a class action that would represent at least 200 employees.

"We're committed to meeting our legal obligations and committed to treating our employees fairly. From what we know, it appears the suit is without merit," Great Lakes Cheese said in a statement.

The lawsuit says the violations meant that workers logged more than 40 hours in a week but were not paid overtime. Overtime violation claims have mushroomed in recent years, with companies such as Wal-Mart and IBM finding themselves defendants.

Plaintiffs' lawyer Anthony Lazzaro said Great Lakes Cheese records show a clear pattern of shaving employee start times at the Hiram plant by up to 27 or 28 minutes because of the rounding-down practice.

The clock should start, he added, when cheese handlers, line attendants, slice operators, machine operators and transporters have to don smocks, special footwear, hairnets, beard guards, hearing protection and hard hats.

Line attendants Constance Denson and Laura Steerman are the named plaintiffs in the lawsuit filed July 2 in U.S. District Court in Akron. Lazzaro said he did not want them commenting yet on the claims.

The lawsuit describes Steerman's daily work times in November to illustrate what it says was improper rounding that left her working 298 minutes, almost five hours, without pay.

"Taking small amounts of time from a large number of employees on a daily basis can significantly reduce the labor costs for a company," plaintiffs' attorney Jason Bristol said.

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