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By Heller

Ex-workers exposed to PCB name 2 firms in complaint

OAKLAND — A complaint for damages on behalf of workers exposed to toxic chemicals while working at a General Electric Co. plant in East Oakland was filed Wednesday in Alameda County Superior Court.

The class action represents about 300 employees who worked at the facility at 5441 E. 14th St. in the 1950s and 1960s. Named as defendants were General Electric, which manufactured and repaired transformers at the plant, and Monsanto Corp., manufacturer of polychlorinated biphenyls — or PCB, believed to be toxic and cancer-causing.

San Francisco lawyer Allan Lerch, who represents the workers, contended that people have been "seriously injured" by exposure to the PCB, resulting in maladies ranging from cancer and high blood pressure to severe headaches and emotional distress. The chemical was used in the the transformers.

The action also contends that the General Electric Co. provided no warning or protection to employees who were later forced to seek medical attention and who lost time at work.

Karl Lathrop, the project manager for a cleanup operation for General Electric at the Oakland facility, said the plant had been under an abatement order since December 1980 from the state Department of Health Services. But Lathrop said Wednesday that "for all intents and purposes, (the cleanup) is done."

Electrical transformers were manufactured at the site between 1927 and 1975, Lathrop said. Less than 10 percent of the transformers used an oil that contained PCB, he said.

The use of PCB ended in 1975, but Lathrop said the site "was moderately contaminated due to spills."

The action asks for damages including medical expenses and lost wages.