

Car workers 'under huge stress'

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EMPLOYEES fighting for redundancies at a Sydney car parts manufacturer were under significant psychological distress, a court was told today.

The Federal Court is hearing a dispute in which Tristar Steering and Suspension is accused of retaining long-serving employees until their redundancy agreement expires early next year to avoid paying them millions of dollars in entitlements.

The court has been told workers spend their days at the company's factory in Sydney's inner-west reading newspapers, making model aeroplanes and playing cards.

Brain and Mind Research Institute executive director Ian Hickie today told the court he had assessed psychological questionnaires completed by 30 Tristar employees.

"In general terms, this group of people is reporting about twice the rate of significant psychological distress as the general population," he told the court.

"The most likely explanation for the increased level of distress reported by these persons is the common experience of ongoing exposure to an adverse work environment."

In an affidavit, Professor Hickie said the longer the psychological distress persisted, the greater the risk of physical ill-health, alcohol and substance misuse, relationship difficulties and attempted and actual suicide.

"The risk factors to adverse psychological and physical health to which Tristar employees are exposed are now of sufficient duration to be expected to result in actual psychological injury," he said.

"The actions of Tristar are not consistent with those of other employers who seek to provide a workplace that reduces the likelihood of psychological injury in the workplace."

The psychological assessment is based on standard self-report Kessler and SPHERE questionnaires, which measure levels of psychological distress but do not pinpoint individual diagnoses.

Prof Hickie said in making his findings, he had taken the small number of people in the Tristar sample into account when comparing it to a wider sample from the general community.

The cases of 23 Tristar workers seeking redundancies have been resolved, leaving nine to still be paid out.

The hearing continues.