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SOUTH FLORIDA

Florida scrap heap was 50 feet high and worth millions. So somebody tried to steal it.

BY JAY WEAVER

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A pile of shredded scrap metal is pictured at AIM Recycling Florida's facility in Davie. The company claims in a new federal lawsuit that an employee ran a ring that stole millions of dollars' worth of scrap and sold it at a steep discount to a competitor in Opa-locka. *AIM RECYCLING FLORIDA*



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The mountain of metal sometimes reached as high as 50 feet and weighed 30 million pounds.

So, it was tough to tell whether any pieces of the valuable scrap were missing from a Davie recycling facility — until an employee confessed a dirty secret to his managers.

He revealed that a fellow worker was hauling away millions of dollars' worth of metal fragments at AIM Recycling Florida in the middle of the night and selling the scrap at a steep discount to a competitor in Opa-locka over the past year, according to a new racketeering lawsuit filed in federal court.

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Samuel Abreu collected the payments from Metals USA and redistributed the money to a ring of more than a half-dozen employees whom he is suspected of recruiting at AIM, the suit says. They helped not only with trucking shipments to Metals USA but also with “hiding” the missing scrap — called “frag” in the industry — by manipulating AIM’s weight scales to make it look like the recycling company was receiving less bulk metal. Most of the scrap came from crushed cars totaled in accidents.

A longtime AIM employee, Pedro Torres, says he was recruited into the alleged theft scheme to adjust the scales to conceal the missing metal. In a sworn statement, he said that “because the stacks of frag are so significant in size, it is almost impossible to tell with the naked eye if large portions of those stacks (even a few tons) have been removed at any given time.

“So, they would work together to steal these materials at night, bringing trucks in through a previously unguarded back entrance, loading up the stolen materials, and then departing through that same unguarded back entrance,” Torres admitted in the affidavit.

Torres confessed after his AIM supervisors confronted him with a video recording of his accepting \$3,000 cash in an envelope from Abreu in late January. In all, he said he collected a total of \$30,000 in cash from Abreu since last summer.

Abreu kept the “lion’s share” of ill-gotten proceeds for himself while doling out thousands of dollars each week to other employees in the ring, the lawsuit said, naming him and Metals USA as defendants.

Abreu’s lawyer, Paul Petruzzi, a notable Miami criminal defense attorney, declined to comment about the allegations. “Right now, we’re trying to get a full understanding of the civil claims,” Petruzzi said Thursday. Abreu, 52, who went to work at the Davie recycling company in 2014, has a state criminal history, public

records show, but has not been charged with any crimes related to stolen scrap metal.

Metals USA is accused in the suit of “knowingly” buying AIM’s stolen scrap metal “at far less than the market rate” and selling it to the same businesses that purchase directly from AIM, including refineries in the United States, China and India.

Attorneys Alexander Fox and Simon Ferro, who represent Metals USA, denied the allegations, saying: “We’re anxious to resolve this case in court.”

While the civil case moves forward, federal authorities led by the FBI are investigating the fraud allegations against Abreu and possible co-conspirators.

In total, Abreu and his co-workers stole at least \$3 million worth of AIM’s scrap metal in 2017 alone — but that’s considered a conservative estimate, according to the lawsuit filed in Fort Lauderdale federal court. AIM’s losses in stolen scrap from crushed cars and other raw metals is likely to be “many times the 2017 amount,” according to the recycling company’s lawyers.

Abreu, who resides in Hialeah, spent his share conspicuously, court records show. Among his purchases: a \$227,000 home in Kissimmee, an Audi S7, multiple Ford Mustangs, a Ford F-250, a boat, and a \$12,000 Breitling watch. Abreu also hung out at the Hard Rock Casino, where AIM’s owners believe he gambled away thousands of dollars he obtained from his alleged scheme.

A federal judge has issued a temporary restraining order preventing Abreu from selling those assets while he and Metals USA face legal action. U.S. District Judge William Zloch also froze Abreu’s bank accounts.

“There is a good cause to believe that defendant Samuel Abreu has engaged in a fraud in violation” of state and federal racketeering laws, Zloch found in his restraining order.

AIM’s attorney, Benton Curtis with the Broad and Cassel law firm, said he has obtained “confessions” from five of the six AIM employees involved in Abreu’s alleged scheme.

Curtis noted that “Abreu is not included in this list because, once realizing that [AIM managers] knew of his past illicit conduct, he stopped showing up for work and refused to meet with AIM representatives to answer pointed questions about the scheme,” including the video surveillance of his payment to Torres in January.

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