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Jury gives CalTech complete win over former researcher's claims

By Glenn Jeffers
Daily Journal Staff Writer

A jury deliberated for two hours Monday before finding for the California Institute of Technology in a wrongful termination suit in which a former researcher accused the school of retaliation for his ouster in 2016.

The Los Angeles County Superior Court jury did not believe Farshid Roumi's claims that Caltech harassed him, barred him from his lab and later terminated him, causing a loss of income and reputation. Instead, they granted the institute a complete defense verdict against Roumi's complaint. *Roumi v. California Institute of Technology*, BC654132 (L.A. Super. Ct., filed Mar. 14, 2017).

"This was a really important case to Caltech," said John Hueston of Hueston Hennigan LLP, who led the defense. "They were not going to settle the case. They felt on principle that they truly were right."

Mark T. Quigley of Greene Broilet & Wheeler LLP represented Roumi and did not return calls late Monday for comment.

Over the four-week trial, Hueston and co-lead Moez Kaba, brought a number of high-level Caltech administrators to testify against Roumi's claims, including former vice provost Morteza "Mory" Gharib and Guruswami "Ravi" Ravichandran, chair of the engineering and applied sciences division.

"Central to our defense verdict was the spirited participation of a number of key high level officials at Caltech," Hueston said.

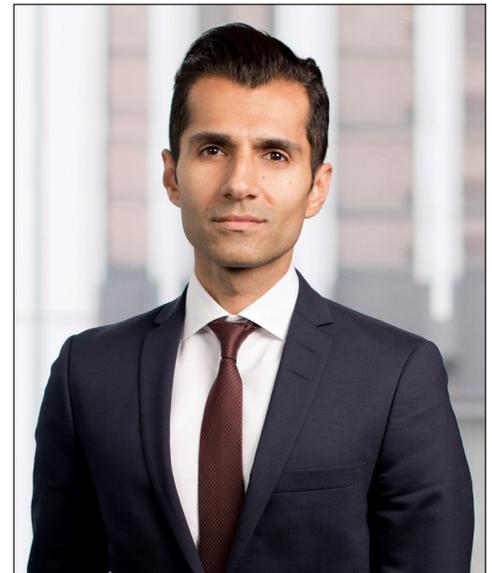
They testified that Roumi, whom Caltech hired after receiving a U.S. Department of Energy grant to develop a next-generation

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lithium-ion battery, was afforded every opportunity to complete his work, but instead would spend weeks at a time away from his lab, miss deadlines and micromanage his team.

Roumi contended he was barred from the lab after reporting research misrepresentation and funds misappropriation to Caltech officials and the U.S. energy department. Three Caltech investigations did not find any misrepresentation, misappropriation or retaliation.

Some of the trial's more contentious moments came during Roumi's two days on the witness stand. At times emotive to the point of tears, Roumi testified his reputation had been ruined since Caltech terminated him, though the school contended that Roumi's position was contingent upon his energy department funding.

**Kaba**

But on cross examination, Hueston poked holes in Roumi's testimony, from how he cited the research of other academics in his own reports to his allegations that the school withheld financial information he needed to complete a budget renewal application on time, eventually leading to the project's shutdown.

During that cross, Hueston provided a spate of emails sent to Roumi by school officials asking him to come in to discuss the financial information. Roumi never responded to the emails.

"Jurors engaged in some discussions with us afterwards and they questioned the credibility of the plaintiff," Hueston said. "They also believed our witnesses and our theme that Caltech at all times helped and did not attempt to undermine Dr. Roumi and his efforts to develop his battery project."