

World

High drama of cleaners left in the lurch 42 storeys up

United States
Will Pavia New York

The window cleaners were dangling 500ft above West 45th Street when the gantry holding them lurched and tilted like a pinball flipper. Soon it was listing at an angle of 45 degrees.

The windows they were cleaning did not open: they were marooned on the face of a 700ft skyscraper, 42 storeys above midtown Manhattan.

Steven Kind and Rene Perez hung there for 30 minutes and a crowd gathered below.

Firemen with diamond-tipped blades and suction cups cut two holes in the thick glass, threw a rope to the cleaners and hauled them into the building.

Mr Kind, 40, has filed a lawsuit accusing the scaffold company and the building's management company of negligence on that morning last July.

"He suffered life-altering injuries," said Dario Perez, his lawyer.

It was once thought that the job of scaling skyscrapers with a bucket would be rendered obsolete by self-cleaning glass and robotic washers but a new generation of glass towers with rolling or bevelled façades has ensured that window washers are more in demand than ever — One World Trade Center [Freedom Tower] will require a special scaffold



Firemen cut holes through glass to save the window cleaners on a New York skyscraper

to allow cleaners to navigate its eight triangular façades. Vast improvements in safety have been made since the first cleaners ventured onto the ledges of skyscrapers, gripping the window frames with their fingertips, but accidents still happen.

"Often they are not harnessed in properly or their equipment fails," said Adam Shapiro, a lawyer who represents window cleaners in negligence claims. "There is a lot of psychological trauma."

Ivor Hanson, 49, a former window cleaner who wrote *Life on the Ledge*, recalls reaching across to attach a line to a hook on an adjacent window. The hook slid out of the wall. "I was still attached to the other window hook," he said yesterday. "I was dangling there, nine or ten storeys up."

In Chicago, where cleaners rappel down office blocks, they are sometimes blown from the building. "You are attached to your line but you come back at speed against concrete," said Charles Adkins, vice-president of Corporate Cleaning Services.

Mr Kind's case alleges negligence by Titanium Scaffold Services and Silverstein Properties. "The scaffold suddenly failed, collapsed, fell and otherwise violently moved," his case says. The companies declined to comment but an inspector's report obtained by Silverstein Properties blamed the incident on errors by the two cleaners.

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