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PERSPECTIVE

Speaking Up

Attorneys at Matern Law Group are passionate about providing a voice for employees.

By Shane Nelson

Special to the Daily Journal

About a year ago, longtime employment litigator Matthew J. Matern started hosting a weekly radio show on KABC in Los Angeles, discussing social issues and politics with activists, authors and California state officials.

Matern said interviewing guests on the program hasn't been a complete departure from work he's done as an attorney for the past 30 years.

"It's like taking a deposition without having the same rules apply," he said with a chuckle. "It's really been a lot of fun."

Discussion topics cover a great deal of ground, according to Matern, but environmental issues come up frequently, in part because those challenges are of significant interest to the attorney.

Matern said his firm — Matern Law Group PC — is litigating a case against Exxon Mobil Corp., representing a now certified class of property owners who claim oil leaks and fires at the Torrance refinery resulted in hazardous groundwater and air quality contamination. *Arnold Goldstein v. Exxon Mobil Corporation*, 2:17-cv-02477 (C.D. Cal., filed March 30, 2017).

The environmental class action is a significant departure from Matern Law Group's longtime focus on representing plaintiffs in individual employment complaints — cases often involving wrongful termination, harassment or discrimination claims — as well as the shop's extensive background in wage-and-hour class actions.

Matern said litigating against Exxon Mobil has required a substantial commitment, mentioning



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Dalia Khalili and Matthew Matern stand for a portrait at their office in Manhattan Beach on Tuesday, March 8, 2022. Justin L. Stewart

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—Senior associate Dalia R. Khalili

the cost and time required to square off against a massive oil corporation.

"They certainly litigate hard and put you to the task of proving your case in every way, shape or form,"

Matern said. "But I've developed a passion for protecting the environment over the years. ... And if I can give back to the community at all to help out, then I think we as lawyers should be more engaged."

Matern grew up on the south side of Chicago and earned his undergraduate degree at Tulane University before graduating from Southwestern Law School in 1991, completing much of that legal de-

gree while taking classes at night and raising a daughter.

After passing the bar, Matern opened a shop with a partner, and the two worked together for nearly 20 years before deciding to go in their own directions. In 2012, Los Angeles-based Matern Law Group opened its doors for business. The firm is home for 25 attorneys today and has offices in Los Angeles and Oakland.

Matern said that as a young attorney he took on a range of cases — including personal injury, bankruptcy, real estate and divorce matters — but when he started handling employment and wage-and-hour complaints, he found he really enjoyed the practice area.

“I liked helping people who had been harmed in that way and felt it was really important work,” he said.

“And most of our clientele are lower-wage workers,” Matern said of his firm’s clients. “We generally are not representing executives

or highly paid middle managers or people in that group. I’d say 90% of our clients are hourly employees. ... And I feel good going to sleep at night knowing we’ve helped a lot of people who really would not be in a position to help themselves.”

Matern Law Group represented more than 45,000 janitors in a class action filed in 2007 against facilities management company ABM Industries. The lawsuit claimed ABM shortchanged employees who worked more than one consecutive shift, didn’t allow full meal breaks and didn’t reimburse for travel expenses. *ABM Industries Overtime Cases*, CJC-07-004502 (S.F. Super. Ct., filed April 7, 2007).

Parties in the case reached a tentative \$140 million settlement agreement last July, and Matern said a decision regarding final approval for the deal is scheduled later this month.

“Fingers crossed everything

goes through,” he said. “We’re getting money into the hands of a small city’s worth of people, which I think is a great accomplishment because none of these folks on their own would have had a chance to really do that.”

Senior associate Dalia R. Khalili, who first started working with Matern in 2008 at his prior firm, described him as a terrific mentor and mentioned her similar passion for helping employees who are often very frightened about speaking up.

“It’s really an honor to be able to represent them and give them a voice,” she said. “Many of our clients — they’re just scared. They’re like, ‘I’m going to put my head down and work and just go home,’ but they shouldn’t have to live that way. I’m really grateful they put their trust in us to work on these cases.”

Los Angeles plaintiffs’ attorney Ronald W. Makarem co-counseled his first case with Matern nearly 20 years ago and has handled a

range of employment matters with him since then. Makarem described Matern as a wise attorney who operates with an excellent blend of patience and aggression.

“He has a terrific balance between calmness and tenacity that can be so effective as a litigator,” Makarem said. “And he’s got a team that he believes in and a team that I think really believes in him.”

Matern said he intends to pursue more environmental cases in the future, but it’s clear the work he does representing employees is not an area he’ll step away from anytime soon.

“In some cases, we’ve gotten upwards of \$10,000 to \$20,000 into the hands of low-wage workers, which is significant. It’s meaningful to them in their lives to get a recovery like that,” he explained. “And it feels good to know we’ve helped people who are vulnerable and have been taken advantage of by many employers around the state of California.”