

Ex-Workers Object To Kodak Discrimination Settlement

BEN DOBBIN AP Business Writer — October 26, 2009

ROCHESTER, N.Y. (AP) — A group of former Eastman Kodak Co. workers objected Friday to a proposed \$21.4 million deal to settle two lawsuits by black employees who maintain they were paid and promoted less than white counterparts.

"We've all been mistreated in some way. ... I was just hoping the settlement would be better," said Ora Patterson, 55, who worked assembly-line jobs at the photography products company for 32 years until 2005.

While admitting no wrongdoing, Kodak proposed in July paying about 3,000 current and past workers settlement amounts ranging from \$1,000 to \$75,000. If approved, the deal would end a 2004 class-action lawsuit and a similar lawsuit filed by other black workers in 2007.

U.S. Magistrate Judge Jonathan Feldman heard arguments in favor of the deal from Kodak and lawyers for the plaintiffs. He then fielded complaints from more than a dozen former employees who said that payouts were inadequate, lawyer fees too high and the deal unfairly excluded workers who left Kodak before 1999.

A second hearing will be held Nov. 5 before Feldman issues a written decision on whether to accept or reject Kodak's settlement offer.

Kodak was accused of paying black employees less than white co-workers, passing them over for promotions and maintaining a racially hostile work environment.

Patterson's 33-year-old daughter, Sherlonda, who worked for Kodak for just 11 months, told the judge that "I'm getting more than my mom is. ... It's not right." While she's been offered more than \$3,000, she said her mother's payout will be \$1,000 "for 32 years of dedicated service."

"We caught a real hard time," her mother said outside the packed courtroom. "I hope Kodak will be better in the future toward the younger generation that they don't go through the pain we did."

Barbara Searight, who worked at Kodak for 24 years until 1996, said lawyers "who we trusted and had great confidence in ... sold us out."

"I felt very strongly that I was discriminated against, job-wise," she said. "In my case, no matter if you did your best, you were still held back, and then the whites would get the promotions."

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As part of the deal, Kodak promised to enhance its diversity training for supervisors and hire an industrial psychologist and two labor statisticians to review its pay and promotion policies and recommend improvements.

In a statement, Kodak said it has become "a nationally recognized leader in diversity and inclusion and we remain committed to fairness, dignity and respect in the workplace."

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