Mining Company Wouldn't Hire Black Miners

BRETT BARROUQUERE, Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (AP) — A western Kentucky coal company affiliated with coal giant Alliance Resource Partners discriminated against black applicants while hiring miners for a new mine from 2008 to 2010, the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission alleges in a lawsuit.

The EEOC on Monday sued on behalf of Shawn King and a "class of black applicants," but did not say how many people were covered by the lawsuit. The EEOC said, starting in 2008, River View Coal turned down King and other applicants because of their race.

Aimee McFerren, an attorney in the EEOC's Louisville office, the dispute appears to be the first race discrimination filed by the agency in the western half of Kentucky against a coal company.

"But, we do get occasional complaints over race and gender in coal mining," McFerren said.

River View Coal General Manager Heath Lovell said in a statement that the company believes the lawsuit is without merit.

"The EEOC's claims are inconsistent with River View's commitment to hiring the best and the brightest, regardless of race, and its fundamental respect for hardworking coal miners," Lovell said.

Discrimination complaints against coal companies aren't unusual, but they have generally focused on age or union organizing activities.

Phil Smith, a spokesman for the United Mine Workers of America in Triangle, Va., said no one with the organization can recall a similar lawsuit against a coal mine operator, but also noted that there's no evidence that racial discrimination is a significant problem in the industry.

At issue is how River View conducted hiring at a mine in Waverly, a non-union mine about 25 minutes west of Henderson, Ky., between Aug. 1, 2008 and 2010. The mine started operations in 2009. The underground mine employs 437 people. McFerren was hesitant to say how many people were covered by the lawsuit, saying that figure was still being determined

McFerren said 13 people filed complaints with the agency after being rejected for jobs between August 2008, when River View began interviewing for miners, and 2010. The company didn't give any of the applicants a specific reason for being turned down, and several were not interviewed for open positions, McFerren said.

"There are folks who had applied several times," McFerren said. "I believe one received a standard rejection letter."

Alliance Resource Partners operates five mining companies in western Kentucky, along with mines in Illinois, Indiana, West Virginia and Maryland. River View produced 5.9 million tons of high-sulfur coal in 2010, with 128.5 million tons listed in reserve at the end of that same year.

River View's preparation plant has a throughput capacity of 1,800 tons of raw coal per hour.

Joe Craft, president and CEO of Alliance Resource Partners, is a University of Kentucky graduate who raised a $6 million donation toward the school's basketball practice facility three years ago.

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