Industrial Staffing Company Sued Over Racism Claims

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BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) — Baton Rouge-based Turner Industries is the target of a federal lawsuit alleging widespread discrimination against black employees and a hostile working environment in which the use of racial slurs is commonplace.

The lawsuit, filed Wednesday in Middle District Court in Baton Rouge on behalf of former employee Enrico Williams, alleges that Turner Industries fired Williams after learning that he had signed an affidavit corroborating charges by other co-workers of discriminatory practices. William's statement was part of a civil lawsuit filed last year against Tuner Industries by workers in Texas and Louisiana.

Williams, who is black, was a former supervisor and had worked for the company for 14 years, said Jay Ellwanger, an attorney representing Williams.

Ellwanger said Thursday that his client saw "first-hand an environment of discrimination and retaliation that shouldn't be allowed to continue."

The unfair treatment alleged includes discriminatory lay-offs and capricious disciplinary action against black workers, according to the suit.

Phyllis Cancienne, an attorney for Turner Industries, said Thursday that the company would not comment on the pending litigation. The company, with about 15,000 employees, provides skilled laborers to industrial plants.

The lawsuit, which mirrors legal action pending in federal court in Texas and Baton Rouge involving more than 200 former employees, alleges that Turner Industries has a history of ignoring complaints of discriminatory practices and the hostile treatment of minority workers.

The lawsuit alleges black workers were routine targets of racial slurs by co-workers and managers and subjected to racially offensive drawings and graffiti and nooses "throughout Turner facilities and job sites."

In 2010 the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission investigated worker complaints at a Paris, Texas, facility and found that blacks were subjected to racial slurs and intimidation. According to the EEOC investigation, managers at the plant were aware of the hostile environment, but targeted workers who complained and disciplined white employees who opposed the harassment.

In October, a Texas jury rendered a $4 million verdict against the company in an employment discrimination suit filed by workers at the Paris plant, said Ellwanger, who represented those employees.

"This lawsuit is another volley is this war that we hope Turner Industries will listen to," Ellwanger said Thursday.

To bring attention to the suit, the Louisiana NAACP held a rally and news conference in front of the federal courthouse on Thursday. Among the group were former employees of Turner Industries who carried pictures of hanging nooses and signs with scrawled racial slurs, images they said were placed in work sites in Louisiana and Texas.

"Nothing was ever done about it," said Leamos Byrd, a Baton Rouge carpenter who said he was fired in 2005 after reporting racial slurs and a work bus incident in which co-workers brought a noose on board.

Ernest Johnson, state chairman of the NAACP, called the allegations shameful and said the group will continue to oppose discrimination.

"We want Turner Industries to know that we will continue to fight until they get it right!"

In addition to back pay for Williams, the Baton Rouge suit also seeks to require Turner Industries to provide diversity training for managers, employment discrimination training for all employees and to have human resources representatives located at all Turner facilities.

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