

It Seemed Like a Model Green Energy Firm. But Black Workers Paint a Different Picture.

[nytimes.com/2019/05/06/nyregion/momentum-solar-racial-discrimination-lawsuit.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/06/nyregion/momentum-solar-racial-discrimination-lawsuit.html)

By Patrick McGeehan

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The company seemed like a model for the modern economy. It was growing so fast in the clean-energy field that New Jersey awarded it \$7.2 million in tax incentives to keep adding jobs installing solar panels.

But six black men who worked for the company, Momentum Solar, painted a far different picture: They contend that the managers of its operation on Long Island fostered a racially hostile work environment and fired employees who complained about it.

The managers made frequent use of racist slurs, routinely called black men “boy” and paid them less than white workers, a lawsuit filed on Monday alleged.

The suit, filed in federal court in Brooklyn, seeks class-action status on behalf of all employees who worked out of the company’s warehouse in Plainview, N.Y. It accused the company’s managers of engaging in systemic discrimination against black workers and retaliating against those who filed complaints.

The company responded that there was “no basis in law or fact for the claims” asserted in the suit.

“The six disgruntled former hourly employees were terminated for legitimate, nondiscriminatory reasons including unacceptable workplace behavior, fighting, poor performance, failure to show up for work and violations of material company policies and procedures,” a statement from an outside lawyer for the company said. “The company intends to vigorously defend all claims.”

Momentum Solar, which is based in Metuchen, N.J., claims to be one of the fastest-growing companies in its industry, with more than 1,200 employees across the country. Last year, it received \$7.2 million in tax incentives from New Jersey’s Economic Development Authority for its plan to add more than 150 jobs over three years.

The state’s tax-incentive programs have come under scrutiny after recent revelations by The New York Times that tax breaks were awarded to politically connected companies, though Momentum was not one of the firms cited in the The Times report.

Momentum, which was founded in 2009, said it would create a new location within 10 miles of its current headquarters.

“What Momentum’s investors and clients and the taxpayers who help foot the bill for its operations do not know is that the management at the company’s New York-based warehouse fostered a work environment permeated with vile racism,” the complaint stated.

The former employees are represented by Michael J. Willemin of the Wigdor law firm in Manhattan.

One of the former Momentum workers, Shaddon Beswick, said in an interview that he was subjected to frequent use of the “N-word” and called “panel boy” as he lugged 50-pound solar panels up a 40-foot ladder to the roofs of two-story houses.

“It was just random racism,” said Mr. Beswick, who is an electrician. He said he put up with it for a while because he had a baby daughter and bills to pay. But when he noticed that white workers were getting better assignments while he was consistently given “grunt work,” he complained to his manager, he said.

The manager dismissed his complaints, telling him that there were “always three sides to a story: your side, his side and the truth,” Mr. Beswick recalled. A day after lodging one of these complaints, he said he was fired and told, “It just didn’t work out.”

Tevin Brown, one of the plaintiffs, said he started out at \$15 an hour and never received a raise in his five months with Momentum. One day, a new white employee with no experience in solar installation told Mr. Brown that he was receiving \$22 an hour.

Mr. Brown said he eventually told a foreman that he was tired of being called “boy” at work. He was abruptly shifted from that crew and, within weeks, was fired, he said. His replacement: the inexperienced white worker who was earning \$7 an hour more, he said.

Another plaintiff, Garreth Murrell, said he left a job with Tesla and took a pay cut to join Momentum, believing that he would receive a raise after “I show them how I work.” Mr. Murrell was promoted to a foreman position, overseeing an all-black crew of installers, but he was “shamelessly paid less than his white counterparts,” according to the complaint.

In a conversation that Mr. Murrell recorded, according to the complaint, the general manager told him: “I almost fired you. I kept your job. That was a mistake right there. That was my mistake because we’re still having this conversation.”

After Mr. Murrell complained, the company “began a campaign of blatant and unlawful retaliation against Mr. Murrell in an apparent bid to force him to quit,” the complaint said. Foremen and managers engaged in racially hostile behavior in a group text chat, saying “Make Momentum Great Again!” a phrase the plaintiffs argue is loaded with racism and xenophobia.

After Mr. Murrell took his complaints beyond the general manager to an executive in New Jersey, he was fired by text message, he said.

“I got a text message saying we don’t need your services any more,” he said.

