

Black Amazon manager sues the e-commerce giant, accusing it of race and gender discrimination

[washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/03/01/amazon-race-discrimination-lawsuit](https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/03/01/amazon-race-discrimination-lawsuit)

By Jay Greene

March 1, 2021

SEATTLE — A Black senior manager at Amazon sued the company, two colleagues and one former co-worker for race and gender discrimination, claiming she was denied promotions and sexually harassed at the e-commerce giant.

Charlotte Newman's suit, filed in federal court in Washington, D.C., accuses co-workers of engaging in racial stereotypes, describing her as "too direct," "just scary," and saying she looked "like a gorilla." One former employee groped Newman's thigh at a work dinner and propositioned her for sex, according to the suit.

"Amazon should harness the power of diverse leadership, instead of dimming the light of Black employees," Newman, a manager in Amazon's cloud-computing division, said in an emailed statement provided by her lawyer, Douglas Wigdor.

Amazon does not tolerate discrimination or harassment, spokesperson Kate Brinks said.

"We are currently investigating the new allegations included in this lawsuit," Brinks said in an emailed statement.

(Amazon founder and chief executive Jeff Bezos owns The Washington Post.)

Two of three individuals named as defendants in the case — Steven Block and Shannon Kellogg — still work for Amazon, while the third — Andres Maz — has left the company, Brinks said. According to Newman's suit, Amazon fired Maz after an investigation into her claims. Brinks declined to say if any of the employees were disciplined.

Block and Kellogg didn't respond to requests for comment via their LinkedIn profiles. Maz couldn't be reached for comment.

The suit comes as Amazon has wrestled in the past several months with employee unrest as well as claims of racial discrimination. Last year, Amazon fired two tech workers at its Seattle headquarters who were outspoken critics of the company's climate policies. A few weeks earlier, Amazon fired Chris Smalls, a Black warehouse worker in Staten Island, after he raised safety concerns to several media outlets, including The Washington Post. In both cases, Amazon said the workers were terminated for violating company policies.

Days after Small's firing, Amazon general counsel David Zapolsky suggested the company's senior leaders fend off safety criticism by turning the focus on Smalls, calling him "not smart or articulate." After the news site Vice reported on the letter, Zapolsky said in a statement

that he “let my emotions draft my words and get the better of me.” In November, Smalls filed a class-action suit against Amazon, accusing the company of failing to protect warehouse workers.

Amazon is also trying to fend off a union organizing drive at a warehouse in Bessemer, Ala., where 5,805 workers are in the middle of a seven-week voting period to determine if they’ll join the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union. Many of the Bessemer workers are Black, and RWDSU President Stuart Appelbaum said the fight is “as much as a civil rights struggle as a labor struggle.”

Those battles with people of color, as well as protests by workers including recent East African immigrants at an Amazon warehouse in Shakopee, Minn., illustrate “systemic” racial discrimination issues at the company, said Maurice BP-Weeks, co-executive director of the Action Center on Race and the Economy, a nonprofit focused on racial and economic justice. The fact that Newman’s allegations occurred in Amazon’s corporate ranks is predictable, BP-Weeks said.

“It’s not surprising to me that it threads through to the management side,” BP-Weeks said. “It’s a company culture question.”

Amazon’s Brinks disputed that charge, even while acknowledging the company has work to do.

“Teams across Amazon have hired hundreds of thousands of Black employees and thousands of Black managers, and our retention data and employee surveys illustrate that they have similar attrition rates and greater job satisfaction and feelings of inclusion than their non-Black colleagues,” Brinks said.

In her suit, Newman alleges that Amazon has engaged in a practice of hiring people of color at levels lower than their experiences merit and then promoting them less than similarly skilled White workers. Newman, who graduated from Harvard Business School and previously worked as an economic policy adviser to Sen. Cory Booker (D-N.J.), works as Head of Underrepresented Founder Startup Business Development at Amazon Web Services, according to her lawyer.

Newman also accused a former direct manager, Block, of using racial stereotypes to criticize her performance in meetings, calling her “aggressive,” “too direct” and “just scary,” according to the suit.

While shopping on a business trip, a different unnamed colleague told Newman she looked like “a gorilla” when she put on a black jacket, the suit alleges. The colleague apologized after Newman noted how offensive the comment was, according to the suit.

Newman also accused Maz of propositioning her for sex, according to the suit. During a work dinner, Newman alleged that Maz groped her upper thigh. Newman left the table and took a different seat when she returned, according to the suit. Outside the restaurant as she waited for a ride home, Maz propositioned Newman to have sex, which she declined.

In the suit, Newman accuses Maz of seizing on “Amazon management’s dismissive attitude toward Black and female employees” and engaging in “repeated sexual harassment” of her.

Newman accused Kellogg, vice president of public policy at the cloud-computing division, of stalling her professional advancement at Amazon, based on the impressions Maz provided of her.

The suit seeks damages for emotional distress to be determined at trial.