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Fox News Ignored Controller's Racist Conduct, Suit Claims

By **Vin Gurrieri**

Law360, New York (March 29, 2017, 2:42 PM EDT) -- Two Fox News accounting employees accused the company of looking the other way as its longtime controller regularly mocked minority workers with racially charged statements and retaliated against them after they refused to settle pending litigation, according to a lawsuit filed Tuesday in New York state court.

Payroll manager Tichaona Brown and payroll coordinator Tabrese Wright, who are both black, alleged that Fox News Network LLC for years allowed Judith Slater, a former senior vice president of accounting and controller at Fox, to get away with subjecting "dark-skinned employees" to a racially hostile work environment without any repercussions, according to the suit.

The suit, which names Slater individually as well as Fox News Network and parent company 21st Century Fox Inc. as defendants, alleged that Fox executives were well aware of Slater's racist conduct, which allegedly included constant verbal ridicule toward people of color, but "intentionally turned a blind eye" to it.

"The severity and pervasiveness of the racism at Fox are such that, within the confines of this complaint, it is not possible to list each instance of bias that employees experienced," Brown and Wright's complaint said. "However, as the conduct described herein makes clear, Ms. Brown, Ms. Wright and other similarly-situated employees of color, regularly and repeatedly were subjected to intolerable and outrageous racial discrimination."

A spokesperson for Fox News told Law360 Wednesday that the company "take[s] complaints of this nature very seriously and took prompt and effective remedial action before Ms. Brown and Ms. Wright sued in court and even before Ms. Wright complained through her lawyer."

"There is no place for inappropriate verbal remarks like this at Fox News," the spokesperson added. "We are disappointed that this needless litigation has been filed."

A representative for 21st Century Fox referred a request for comment to its subsidiary.

Besides just claims of racial discrimination and harassment, which were brought under New York city and state human rights statutes, Brown and Wright also claim that Slater was fired shortly after their attorneys notified the network that it would be filing the instant case. The plaintiffs said Slater's termination wasn't for her discriminatory conduct, but rather was part of a broader PR effort by Fox News to get out in front of the story and "salvage its reputation."

Additionally, the lawsuit alleges that Fox also recently fired Brown and demoted Wright for not settling their claims on terms favorable to the company.

Fox News, however, disputed those retaliation claims, telling Law360 through a representative that Brown is still employed and was not fired while Wright has not been demoted.

Instead, Fox News says that on Monday Wright was laterally moved to another sector of the finance and accounting department and that she still maintains her previous job title of coordinator as well as the same salary and benefits.

The network confirmed that Slater was fired on Feb. 28.

Brown has worked at Fox since late 2008, and Wright has been employed at the company since August 2014.

Their lawsuit contained a plethora of examples demonstrating Slater's improper behavior, including instances in which she allegedly ridiculed black employees by mocking stereotyped speech and forced black employees to practice saying words like "mother," "father" and "ask" in front of white employees.

Slater also allegedly categorized the "Black Lives Matter" movement as "extremely racist," disparaged black men in particular by categorizing them as domestic abusers and regularly spoke about her purported fear that black people want to physically harm white people.

As to Wright in particular, Slater allegedly asked if all of her three children "were fathered by the same man," while Brown was allegedly subjected to "persistent" comments disparaging her intellect and social standing.

Slater's alleged ridicule, according to the suit, wasn't confined only to African-Americans. She also purportedly took aim at individuals of Indian, Mexican and Chinese descent with an assortment of disparaging and stereotypical comments.

Brown and Wright claimed that they and other employees of color feared they would be fired if they complained about Slater's conduct and that they lacked an adequate outlet to lodge their complaint since Fox's senior vice president of human resources allegedly participated in the discrimination with Slater.

"We are confident that the good men and women of the Bronx will hold Fox accountable for what we believe to be its abhorrent racist conduct reminiscent of the Jim Crow era," said plaintiffs' counsel Douglas Wigdor of Wigdor LLP.

Fox News said it didn't have contact information for Slater. Case docket information was not yet available to determine whether she has retained counsel.

Tuesday's lawsuit comes less than a year after former Fox News host Gretchen Carlson accused former Fox News Chairman and CEO Roger Ailes of sexual harassment and retaliation in a **bombshell lawsuit** that touched off a series of events that ultimately led to **Ailes' resignation** as well as **additional allegations of sexual harassment** from numerous other women who worked at the company.

21st Century Fox and Carlson announced in September that they had settled the case for a reported \$20 million.

The plaintiffs are represented by Douglas H. Wigdor, Jeanne M. Christensen and Michael J. Willemin of Wigdor LLP.

Counsel information for the defendants was not immediately available.

The case is Tichaona Brown et al. v. Twenty-First Century Fox Inc. et al., in the New York State Supreme Court Bronx County. The case number was not available.

--Additional reporting by Kat Greene. Editing by Jack Karp.