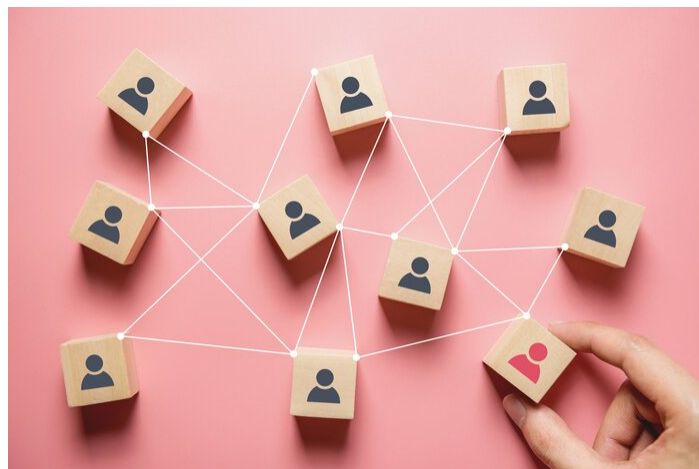


Major Lindsey Accused Of Targeting Atty Who Sued Troutman

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By **Ryan Boysen** · [Listen to article](#)

Law360 (April 2, 2024, 4:25 PM EDT) -- Legal recruiter Major Lindsey & Africa was hit with a lawsuit on Tuesday claiming it internally "blackballed" a midlevel associate who sued Troutman Pepper for racial discrimination, thereby putting the lie to Major Lindsey's "claims to champion diversity" and making the firm an "accomplice" to "systemic race discrimination" in the legal industry.



An attorney hit legal recruiter Major Lindsey & Africa with a lawsuit claiming it "blackballed" her after she sued her former employer Troutman Pepper for retaliation when she was fired after filing a complaint alleging racial discrimination. (iStock.com/oatawa)

In a 22-page complaint, attorney Gita F. Sankano said emails and other internal documents from Major Lindsey showed the firm decided to stop working with her after she sued Troutman Pepper in January.

That **lawsuit** claimed Troutman Pepper fired Sankano in retaliation for filing a formal complaint over racially tinged disparate treatment and an email from a partner that belittled her, among other things.

"As the premier recruiting firm for big law and large corporations, MLA should stand with victims of race discrimination and be a leader in the fight against discrimination in all forms," Tuesday's complaint said. "Instead ... it has proven to be an accomplice to it."

In a statement, Sankano's attorney, Michael J. Willemin of Wigdor LLP, put a finer point on that sentiment.

"No law firm or company should want to work with an organization that operates like MLA did in this instance," Willemin said.

In its own statement, Major Lindsey said that "diversity has long been a core value" at the firm, and therefore it takes "Ms. Sankano's allegations in this matter extremely seriously."

"At the same time, MLA does not have contractual relationships with its candidates, and cannot control which candidates receive interviews or job offers from firms," the statement continued. "In our communications both internally and to Ms. Sankano, our aim was to offer our best professional advice and to convey a basic principle of our industry: that law firms may be wary of hiring someone who is suing another law firm. For this reason, we intend to defend this matter vigorously."

Tuesday's complaint said Sankano began working with Major Lindsey managing director Randi Lewis in November 2023, shortly after Sankano was terminated by Troutman Pepper.

Lewis was initially dismissive when Sankano told Lewis she'd been fired for speaking out against racial discrimination, the complaint said, and Lewis tried to convince Sankano not to sue her former firm.

When Sankano did sue on Jan. 17, Lewis called her the next day and told her a position they'd discussed earlier was no longer open. Unbeknownst to Lewis, Sankano already had an interview scheduled for that position on Jan. 19, according to the complaint.

Sankano also included screenshots from Major Lindsey's internal listserv discussing her suit against Troutman Pepper.

On Jan. 18, Major Lindsey managing director Andy Ufberg sent an email saying, "That's Randi and my candidate fyi however we won't work with her now," referring to Sankano.

Lewis responded: "Agreed. I will call her later."

Later the same day, Eliza Stoker, a Major Lindsey executive director who runs the firm's associate practice group, sent an update, saying: "Hi everybody — for those of you wondering, we are not washing our hands of this candidate, but we do need to exit the paid relationship at this point due to the likelihood of our being subpoenaed should this move forward. Please LMK if you want to talk about it. Thanks!"

Sankano said she also later learned that Lewis left a comment on Sankano's file, in Major Lindsey's internal client tracking system, that read: "and she filed a discrimination lawsuit ... sigh." Sankano said that comment was later deleted from the system after Major Lindsey received a litigation hold notice in the leadup to Tuesday's complaint.

"Ms. Stoker's attempt to recast its decision to 'exit' its relationship with Ms. Sankano as being related to a potential subpoena is completely absurd," the complaint said. "In any event, regardless of the precise inconvenience that the lawsuit might have on MLA, it is not permitted to retaliate against a job seeker because she filed suit to protest the violation of federal civil rights."

Sankano is seeking damages and an injunction that would prevent Major Lindsey from engaging in "further unlawful conduct," under Section 1981 of the 1866 Civil Rights Act, a post-Civil War statute that prohibits racial discrimination when making and enforcing contracts.

Section 1981 allows plaintiffs to sidestep the requirement of first filing a complaint with state or federal civil rights agencies, as is required under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act or its state-level equivalents. That has also made the statute a favorite weapon in the **flurry of anti-diversity lawsuits** being filed by conservative groups in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling last June striking down affirmative action in higher education.

In Tuesday's complaint Sankano said she would file complaints with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the Maryland Commission on Civil Rights, and amend her lawsuit with claims under Title VII and the Maryland Human Relations Act once she's received permission to sue from those agencies.

Sankano's saga began in 2019, when she was hired as a first-year associate at Pepper Hamilton LLP, which merged with Troutman Sanders LLP the next year to create Troutman Pepper.

Sankano was the only Black attorney in the firm's Washington, D.C., office when she started. Despite receiving generally positive reviews from her superiors in the multifamily housing practice group, Sankano claimed she was often treated differently from white colleagues.

For instance, one partner told Sankano to email her hours to the partner directly, rather than enter them into the firm's system herself. This later led to complaints about Sankano's lack of billable hours. Eventually, Sankano said she realized the partner was "stealing her hours," or "intentionally reducing her hours" to make the partner look more profitable, the complaint said.

Years later Sankano began working with another partner who she claims was verbally abusive and repeatedly directed "belittling comments" toward her. This came to a head in August 2023, when that partner sent her a curt email criticizing Sankano and accusing her of

exacerbating an internal misunderstanding over origination credit on a multifamily deal.

"This is very basic, elementary communication," the email read in part. "This has nothing to do with training, or understanding of multifamily transactional law, this is daily required functioning."

Sankano filed a formal complaint with Troutman Pepper's human resources department soon after. A few weeks later, an internal probe found that while the email was inappropriate, it was not racist. Sankano was fired shortly thereafter due to poor performance.

The email itself **sparked a robust discussion** on social media platforms like Reddit and Twitter, debating whether putting up with nasty emails from partners is simply part of the job description for BigLaw, or whether this particular communication truly crossed the line.

Sankano is represented by Michael J. Willemin of Wigdor LLP, and Gregg C. Greenberg of Zipin Amster & Greenberg LLC.

Counsel information for Major Lindsey was not immediately available.

The case is Gita F. Sankano v. Major Lindsey & Africa et al., case number 8:24-cv-00951, in the U.S. District Court for the District of Maryland.

--Editing by Robert Rudinger.

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Case Information

Case Title

Sankano v. Major, Lindsey & Africa et al

Case Number

8:24-cv-00951

Court

Maryland

Nature of Suit

Civil Rights: Jobs

Judge

Timothy J. Sullivan

Date Filed

April 01, 2024

Law Firms

- Troutman Pepper
- Wigdor LLP
- Zipin Amster

Companies

Government Agencies

- Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
- U.S. Supreme Court



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