

Teamsters union pays \$2.9m to settle racial discrimination lawsuit

Exclusive: union's president, Sean O'Brien, accused of having 'publicly humiliated' Black and Hispanic workers

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Thirteen former Black and Hispanic employees for the Teamsters International Union filed a racial discrimination lawsuit against the union and its president, Sean O'Brien, alleging racial discrimination over their firings after O'Brien assumed the helm in March 2022.

The lawsuit was filed in Washington DC last February, alleging violation of the DC Human Rights Act. The Teamsters paid \$2.9m to settle the lawsuit, according to three union officials.

In an email seen by the Guardian, Teamsters – a union of 1.3 million members – asked its executive board last week to approve the settlement, but denied any wrongdoing.

“I approved it because of the financial liability. I believe had it gone to court it would have cost our members a lot more,” said John Palmer, a Teamsters executive board member. “I’m extremely disappointed.”

The lawsuit claimed that “rather than maintaining or increasing diversity at Teamsters, IBT [International Brotherhood of Teamsters] fired more than a dozen people of color and turned the Organizing Department from a diverse department into a majority white department”.

The terminations “set back the Organizing Department’s goals of effectively recruiting and organizing non-whites”, it alleged, “in favor of bolstering the majority white membership and leadership of the union.

In total, Teamsters terminated 72.73% of the department's staffers who were people of color, while firing only 28.57% of white staffers. Teamsters then proceeded to hire new staff members who were 73.33% white."

The lawsuit also claimed that O'Brien "publicly humiliated" the plaintiffs in the case, claiming they were fired because they were "bad apples" and were "lazy" in their work.

O'Brien has been facing [criticism](#) from members of the Teamsters recently over his decision to meet with the former president and Republican presidential primary frontrunner Donald Trump. They cited Trump's long record of being anti-union and his prejudicial behavior and comments toward women, minorities and the LGBTQ+ community.

"Our dues money has to pay this \$2.9m lawsuit, because our general president racially discriminated against workers. That's just not fair," said the Teamsters Local 623 secretary-treasurer and principal officer, Richard Hooker Jr. "It's a slap in the face of black and brown people, which make up a large contingency of this organization."

The lawsuit claimed the workers had no history of negative performance reviews or disciplinary issues and were not given justification for their firings from human resources, rather only a note telling them their services were no longer needed.

"In or around April 2022, Mr O'Brien gave a speech at Local 186 in Oxnard, California and said that he 'got rid of the bad apples from the organizing department', and that the fired people were 'lazy' and 'didn't do anything' during the Covid-19 pandemic," the lawsuit added. "Mr O'Brien's comments about Plaintiffs were completely unfounded and promote racial stereotypes about Blacks and Hispanics."

The lawsuit noted that 20 out of 36 staffers were terminated from the Teamsters organizing department in total, with 16 being people of color, and only six employees who were not terminated were people of color, claiming that given such disparities in the firings of employees of color compared to

white employees, “a race-blind employer would see a racial disparity of this magnitude in terminations less than one percent of the time”.

Fifteen new staffers were hired in the organizing department after O’Brien assumed leadership of the union, according to the lawsuit, with only four being people of color; a reduction of 51.7% of staff of color in the department.

“It’s unfortunate that any union would be caught having to make settlements around things like racial discrimination particularly in 2024. That is abhorrent and it is sad, it was avoidable,” said Chris Silvera, secretary treasurer of Teamsters Local 808. “It really speaks to the direction that our union is currently participating in right now, walking down the path that is not inclusive.”

The Teamsters did not immediately respond to requests for comment.