

*Bell accused of retaliation against those alleging bias; 20 black current and former employees seek \$50 million*

THE BALTIMORE SUN

September 9, 1999, Thursday, ,FINAL

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**Section:** BUSINESS

**Length:** 326 words

**Body**

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WASHINGTON -- Bell Atlantic Corp. has been sued by 20 black current and former employees of in a \$50 million action that alleges that the company retaliates against workers who report discrimination.

The lawsuit, filed in U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, charges that the telecommunications company has harassed and denied promotions to employees who complained about discrimination on the job.

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Employees involved in a 1996 discrimination suit against the company and those who have filed cases with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission are among the targets of retaliation, the suit contends.

"The plaintiffs file this suit to challenge and to bring to an end Bell Atlantic's practice of retaliation against individuals who protest Bell Atlantic's race discrimination and that company's unlawful retaliation," the lawsuit says.

Bell Atlantic spokeswoman Joan Rasmussen said the company has not seen the complaint, but she said the company has a strong record of keeping discrimination out of the workplace.

"At Bell Atlantic, discrimination of any kind is completely unacceptable," Rasmussen said. "We take allegations of discrimination very seriously."

The \$500 million suit filed by 48 workers in 1996 alleges that the company discriminates against black workers in job placement, training and promotions.

Those claims still may be pursued by individual defendants after a judge denied them class action status, said John Hermina, lawyer for the plaintiffs.

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The newest suit lists a number of alleged acts of retaliation against employees who spoke out about discrimination. Among them, a woman who had filed suit against Bell Atlantic alleging discrimination later pursued -- without success -- 125 job opportunities at the company.

Another worker said he was monitored by colleagues at both his job and his home after charging that the company engaged in discriminatory acts, the suit says.

**Load-Date:** September 10, 1999

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