

**BELL ATLANTIC IS ACCUSED OF JOB BIAS;
PROMOTION, TRAINING PRACTICES ARE TARGET**

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Body

Bell Atlantic Corp. is being sued for \$ 500 million by 48 past and present employees who charge the company with racial discrimination.

The suit was filed in U.S. District Court in Washington on Thursday. Nine of the plaintiffs are from Virginia; the others are from the District of Columbia and Maryland.

"We will not settle," said George Hermina, a Washington lawyer representing the plaintiffs. "Our clients want us to take this all the way. We want changes made in the company."

The group also wants its complaint classified as a class action so other Bell Atlantic employees can join.

The plaintiffs range from service technicians to lower-level managers, Hermina said.

The suit alleges that Bell Atlantic discriminated in its promotion and training practices and discouraged black workers from seeking advancement.

One of the Virginia complainants, who did not want his name used, has been a Bell Atlantic employee since 1979. The Prince William County resident said no training was offered for black technicians.

Michel Daley, a spokesman for Bell Atlantic, said the company denies the charges.

"(The suit) appears to be a grab bag of unrelated employment gripes that show no pattern of discrimination," Daley said. "We believe there is no basis to their complaint."

The suit contends that black workers are given more menial tasks, such as cleaning, while their white counterparts are trained for more technical duties.

The Prince William employee said a "good piece of equipment" was taken away from him and given to a white worker with less experience and less seniority.

One of the people who gathered the group together was Wilbert L. Burgess, who no longer works for Bell Atlantic.

Burgess was hired in March 1993 on a 30-month contract as an assistant technician.

"I was treated very badly," he said. "I was told I couldn't handle the work. It was supposed to be an on-the-job training situation and they had me pushing a trash can around and cleaning up wire closets.

"White workers who were there two weeks, 19- and 20-year-old kids, were doing the technical stuff."

Burgess said that when he complained, his supervisors labeled him a troublemaker and a slow learner. "It was a very degrading and dehumanizing experience," he said.

Because of the reputation he had as a poor worker, he wasn't promoted with the other contractors who came into the company with him, Burgess said.

Bell Atlantic's Daley said the company has an extensive diversity program. "We take pride in our policy to identify and promote qualified women and minority candidates to leadership positions in the company," Daley said. "This policy applies to everyone, from service technicians to presidents."

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