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# Black ex-workers sue Hechinger's for \$150m

By Yvette M. Aldrich  
 AFRO Staff Writer

Fourteen African American men and women, who were former employees of Hechinger Company claim they were fired or forced to sign because of their race or age.

They have filed a discrimination suit asking for \$150 million in compensatory damages.

The suit was filed in U.S. District Court in Greenbelt, Md. on Oct. 26.

In N.Y., Jay Burke, an attorney for Hechinger's described the suit "frivolous" and said that the firm would mount a vigorous defense.

Originally, according to the suit, over 100 ex-employees filed complaints against the company but the cases were narrowed down to the most significant, according to the attorneys John W. and George W. Hermina.

Most of the ex-employees

worked at Hechinger for at least 10 years, some held positions of authority, and all of them had received good employee reviews up until Jan. 1, 1991 when they claim the discrimination began, the suit alleges.

"At or about the end of 1989, John Hechinger, Jr. gained executive control of the Hechinger company. He became a president of the company and began to eliminate the employment of several key executives who were older in age and who were fair to Black and older employees," the suit says.

According to the suit, Mr. Hechinger hired Gary Mercer, identified as a corporate officer, with the sole mission of removing Black and older employees from their "deep roots" with the company.

The suit also says that Catherine Sharpe-Leggitt, senior vice president of human resources for

Hechinger, was the only Black corporate officer at that time. When the discrimination began, she was opposed to it and spoke out about her convictions. The suits alleges she was alienated and eventually forced to resign from her position. She was the first Black in that position and to date, no more have been hired to fill it, the suit continues.

"Mr. Mercer and Mr. Hechinger, Jr. wanted a 'super white race' for their newly-conceived H.P.C. stores. Mr. Hechinger, at this stage, viewed the company as a race automobile on a 'race track.' He and the Hechinger company believed that Blacks were too lazy and older employees could not 'keep up with the pace.' Hence, the mass elimination of older and Black employees began," the suit says.

Hudie Fleming, one of the plaintiffs in the case, was reportedly employed at Hechinger

for 29 years working as a store manager until his termination. He had the authority to hire and fire employees under him.

Reportedly in the fall of 1992 he attended a meeting along with Mr. Hechinger, and Mr. Mercer, in the basement of the Landover store. During the meeting he expressed his fears on behalf of the other Black and older employees.

According to the suit, he was forced to fire good Black

employees while White, young employees were allowed to keep their jobs. In 1994 he, too, was forced to resign.

The suit alleges that many of the Black and older employees were targeted for elimination by way of a "hit list."

The alleged "hit list" was reportedly compiled by Mr. Mercer at the direction of Mr. Hechinger.

Marie Rollison was reported to

be one of the employees on the "hit list." She worked for Hechinger for 10 years as a manager at the distribution branch and received good employment reviews until her name was listed.

According to the suit, the pressure of discrimination forced her to resign. Ironically, at the same time of her resignation, her husband, who worked at Hechinger from age 17 to 33 was fired, the suit says. He died last year.