

Former Amazon.com employee sues over COVID worker safety issues

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New York, November 13 (RHC)-- A former Amazon.com Inc worker who protested conditions at his New York City fulfillment center in the United States sued the retailer on Thursday, accusing it of discrimination for firing him and for putting Black and Hispanic workers at an increased risk of contracting COVID-19.

In a proposed class action filed in Brooklyn federal court, Christian Smalls alleged Amazon failed to provide needed protective gear to its “predominantly minority” workforce, subjecting them to inferior working conditions than its mainly white managers.

Citing a leaked memo from Amazon’s general counsel to Chief Executive Jeff Bezos, Smalls also said Amazon fired him after concluding that, as a Black man, he was a “weak spokesman” for workers. He also said Amazon tried to drum up public support by making him the “face” of workers criticising its

pandemic response.

The complaint seeks unspecified damages for Black and Hispanic workers at the Staten Island facility. Amazon fired Smalls on March 30, saying he joined a protest at the Staten Island facility despite being on paid quarantine, after having close contact with someone diagnosed with COVID-19.

It fired at least three other workers critical of its pandemic response in April, citing various alleged workplace violations.

New York Attorney General Letitia James wrote to Amazon later in April, expressing “serious concern” it was trying to silence critics of its health and safety measures.

In a statement on Thursday, Amazon spokeswoman Lisa Levandowski said Amazon’s focus on customers “is central to our work in diversity and inclusion,” and that Smalls was fired for putting others’ health and safety at risk. The Seattle-based company has benefited from the pandemic as consumers shopped online more often.

Amazon has said it expects to invest \$10 billion this year on COVID-19 initiatives to deliver products and keep employees safe, including by distributing masks to workers and employing disinfectant spraying and temperature checks worldwide.

On October 1st, Amazon said 19,816 of its 1.37 million front-line US workers between March 1 and September 19 had tested positive or were presumed positive for the coronavirus. It said that was 42 percent fewer than if the infection rate had mirrored the rate for the general population.

Last week, a Brooklyn federal judge dismissed a separate lawsuit accusing Amazon of creating a public nuisance at the Staten Island facility.

The case is Smalls v Amazon Inc, US District Court, Eastern District of New York, No. 20-05492.

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