

# Cap & Gown Co. Sued For Hispanic Discrimination

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OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — An Omaha cap-and-gown manufacturer has been accused in federal court of discriminating against its Hispanic employees.

Three lawsuits filed Monday in U.S. District Court in Omaha allege that Willsie Cap & Gown routinely offered better hours, more desirable work, more breaks and even better lighting to non-Hispanic employees. Hispanic employees also were prohibited from speaking Spanish in the plant, while non-Hispanic employees were allowed to speak their native languages, the lawsuits say.

The lawsuits by former employees Balbina Bahena, Maria Cisler and Anna La Torre accuse the company of firing some of its Hispanic workers following complaints made to federal workplace safety officials.

The duplicate lawsuits detail other alleged grievances, including the company's refusal to provide Hispanic employees with the paperwork necessary to be properly paid for piecework. The company also did not give raises to Hispanic employees and reduced the available work hours to the former employees, the lawsuits say.

A message left by The Associated Press with Willsie President Fred Cerwick on Monday was not immediately returned.

Earlier this year, according to the lawsuits, the federal Equal Employment Opportunity and Nebraska Equal Opportunity commissions gave the former workers the go-ahead to file discrimination lawsuits.

The lawsuits claim Willsie violated federal anti-discrimination law by its unfair treatment of Hispanic workers and by retaliating against them following their complaints to the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

The former employees have asked for a jury trial and are seeking damages for lost wages, benefits and attorneys and court fees, as well as punitive damages.

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