

Muslim Meatpackers Sue Over Corporate Intolerance

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OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Somali Muslim workers at a meatpacking plant in Grand Island were denied prayer time and faced harassment and even termination for asking to pray, according to a lawsuit filed Monday by the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

The lawsuit filed on behalf of more than 80 Somali Muslims says JBS Swift & Co. has failed to make reasonable religious accommodations, violating the workers' civil rights, since at least December 2007.

Plant supervisors and non-Somali employees also harassed the Muslim workers, "interrupted their prayers, refused to let them pray, threw meat at them, called them names," among other things, the lawsuit says.

A message left Monday at JBS Swift's U.S. headquarters in Greeley, Colo., wasn't immediately returned.

The tensions over prayer time at the Grand Island plant have been building since 2007. That was when East Africans began filling the gaps left after a 2006 immigration raid cleared illegal Hispanic workers from the plant.

The situation came to a head in September 2008, during Ramadan, when hundreds of Muslim workers walked off the job and picketed in protest, saying they wanted time to pray at sunset and break a daylong fast. Plant management responded the next day by adjusting the work schedule to accommodate them.

Non-Muslims — including Latinos, Sudanese and whites — counterprotested such accommodations, calling it special treatment that would burden the rest of the workforce. Management then ended the accommodations, which sent Muslim workers back to the picket lines.

The company fired 86 Muslim workers for walking off the job. It eventually hired back about a dozen.

JBS Swift has disputed the firings were over religion.

Dozens of Somali Muslim workers filed complaints with the Federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission after the dispute.

The lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court in Omaha seeks an order requiring JBS Swift to provide prayer time and to refrain from retaliating against workers who ask to pray. It also seeks payment for the fired workers.

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