

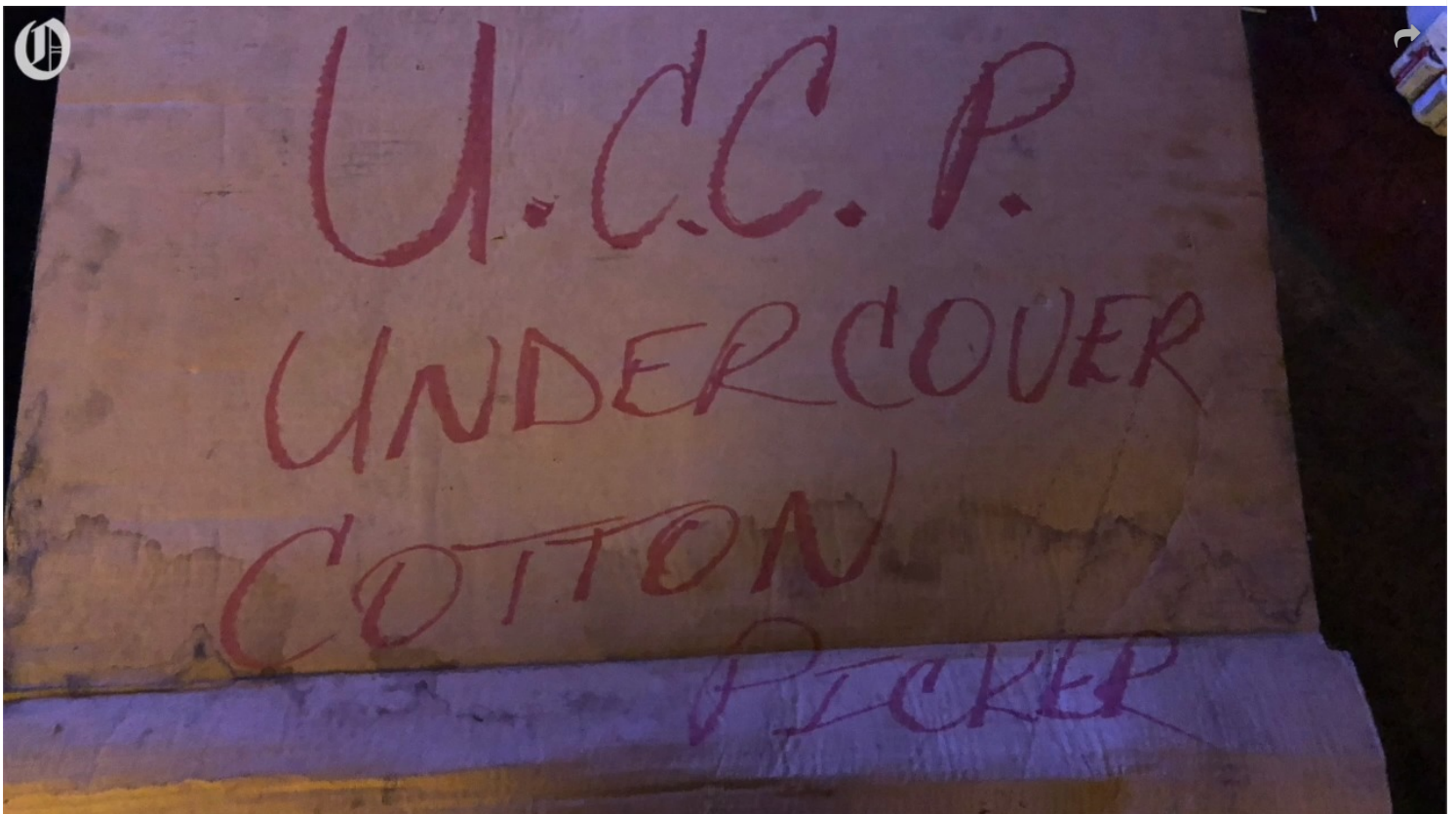


LOCAL

Hendrick workers taunted Black employee with monkey calls, George Floyd meme, suit says

BY MICHAEL GORDON

APRIL 15, 2021 01:41 PM, UPDATED APRIL 16, 2021 08:09 AM



Postal workers Rodney Carelock and Josh Webb said they have undergone years of harassment working in the garage of the Charlotte Post Office. They share examples, including signs left at work stations. BY [MATT WALSH](#) | MATT WALSH



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Lance Blair thought he had found a home at Rick Hendrick's Toyota dealership in Concord, where he had risen to an assistant manager's position after joining the company in 2012.

Instead, he quit in September.

This story is a subscriber exclusive

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Hendrick Toyota Concord, part of the largest privately held automotive retail conglomerate in the country, prides itself with maintaining a “strong culture” based on teamwork and both customer and employee satisfaction, according to its website.

Instead, Blair was forced to leave the dealership — and one of the Carolinas’ most iconic commercial brands — after being targeted by chronic and worsening racial harassment, his new federal lawsuit claims.

Over a period of years, according to the complaint, Blair and other Black employees endured everything from monkey noises to obscene or violent memes involving Michelle Obama and George Floyd.

The chronic harassment wrecked Blair’s health and made his work life untenable, the lawsuit says. That led to his abrupt resignation last fall, after Blair was deemed a “troublemaker” by one of the dealership’s top executives following his email to the human resources director seeking help, the lawsuit alleges.

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Blair has accused the Hendrick Companies of violating a [Reconstruction-era federal law](#) that prohibits racial discrimination and harassment in employment contracts. His lawsuit calls for punitive and compensatory damages and a jury trial.

Defense attorneys Benjamin Holland and Carl Short, both of Charlotte, did not respond to Observer emails this week seeking comment.

Hendrick, who also sponsors one of NASCAR’s most prominent racing teams, becomes the latest name-brand employer to be accused of operating with policies or workplace environments hostile to Black workers. In the past decade such companies as Target, U-Haul, BMW and Ford have been hit by harassment or

discrimination [complaints](#), according to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, or EEOC.

Blair's lawsuit, filed by Charlotte lawyer Luke Largess, focuses on the working conditions at Hendrick's dealership in Concord, where Blair was assistant manager of the detail department and helped supervise a staff of 10 to 12.

According to the complaint, the atmosphere there for Black employees began to turn in 2014.

At first, the bulk of harassment came from one of Blair's white co-workers, identified in the lawsuit as service department foreman Phil St. George. But other white employees began to join in when Blair's bosses refused to intercede, even when other white employees complained about how Blair was being treated, the lawsuit alleges.

St. George did not respond to an Observer email seeking comment. A call to the phone number listed for him in public records went unanswered. He is not listed on the Concord [dealership's service roster](#).

In a Thursday afternoon statement to the Observer, Toyota of Concord said that St. George was fired in October following an internal investigation, and that the dealership rejects all forms of discrimination.

"A core value of our dealership is mutual respect for and among all of our team members," the statement said. "It is our practice to take seriously, thoroughly investigate and swiftly address reports of discrimination. That process was followed in this matter."

RACIAL HARASSMENT SPREAD, LAWSUIT SAYS

In one of the earlier incidents, according to the lawsuit, St. George made monkey noises at Blair while he waved bananas or threw the skins at him.

After retired basketball star Kobe Bryant died in a January 2020 helicopter crash, St. George approached Blair with a meme that included a photograph of Colin Kaepernick, who had led NFL players in kneeling during the national anthem before games to protest police violence against Blacks. "I wish he had a helicopter," the caption read, according to the lawsuit.

St. George later shared another meme, this one showing former first lady Michelle Obama with a beard and a penis, the lawsuit claims. He also called Blair a "tint meter," meaning his skin could be used to measure the legal level of darkening car windows. On another occasion, he said a different Black employee injured on the job wouldn't show bruises because he was a "darkie."

In time, according to the lawsuit, the harassment spread. In August, Blair was the only Black employee on a group text from several white co-workers involving two photos. One showed Minneapolis police Officer Derek Chauvin — now on trial for murder — kneeling on George Floyd's neck; the other, the face of a larger Black man, which had been positioned so it appeared that Chauvin was looking at him.

There was a quote by the officer's head. "That's going to take two knees," it read.

When Blair complained, service manager Tim Hays frequently played down the seriousness of St. George's actions, the lawsuit claims. When St. George threw a place mat at Blair in Hays' presence, the service manager had this response: At least it wasn't a banana peel.

When Blair asked Hays to step in and stop the racist comments and taunts, Hays promised only to ask St. George to be more professional. On another occasion, according to the lawsuit, Hays shrugged off St. George's behavior, telling Blair that some people are just racist.

RICK HENDRICK AND NASCAR'S KYLE LARSON

Blair's lawsuit against Hendrick's dealership is the second news development entangling race and the car mogul's brand.

Hendrick's racing team hired [Kyle Larson](#) in 2020 after the driver was fired by Chip Ganassi Racing and suspended by NASCAR for uttering a racist slur while playing a video game on a public livestream.

"I had to be careful," Hendrick told [Observer columnist Scott Fowler](#) at the time. "You know I wouldn't do something that would hurt our company. Our name. Our brand. And so that was important to me. ... But he just laid his heart out for everybody. ... I think it takes a man to admit, 'Hey, I did something terrible. And I want to make it right.'"

Larson apologized for his comment. He also [unveiled a foundation](#) designed to provide racing scholarships, meals and educational support for needy families.



Hendrick Motorsports signed Larson to a multi-year deal to drive the No. 5 car starting in 2021, but it was the driver's work off the track that allowed him to land the ride following suspension. BY LOUMAY ALESALI

Hendrick Toyota Concord, a nearby neighbor of Charlotte Motor Speedway, is part of a nationwide automotive network involving 93 dealerships, 21 collision centers and more than 10,000 employees.

Blair is no longer among them. According to his lawsuit, he never heard back from the HR director after sending her an email. The next day, however, Hays called him in off the dealership floor and angrily accused him of stirring up trouble among employees, that Hays was tired of dealing with him, and that things needed to change.

They did.

Rather than continue suffering what his lawsuit describes as "the harassment and humiliation that was ruining his health and sense of well-being," Blair quit.

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APRIL 15, 2021 8:47 AM



A federal lawsuit alleges that a white employee at a Rick Hendrick car dealership in Concord, NC, threw bananas at a Black co-worker and subjected him to other racists taunts. *GOOGLE*

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Michael Gordon has been the Observer’s legal affairs writer since 2013. He has been an editor and reporter at the paper since 1992, occasionally writing about schools, religion, politics and sports. He spent two summers as “Bikin Mike,” filing stories as he pedaled across the Carolinas.

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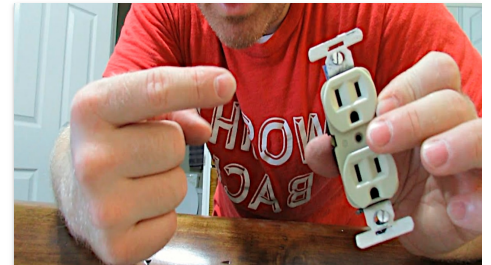
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