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LONG ISLAND

Citing Racism, Workers File Suit Against Huntington

By CHARLIE LeDUFF

HUNTINGTON, N.Y., Nov. 18 — Thirty-two current and former employees of the Town of Huntington filed a sweeping discrimination lawsuit against the town today, saying that officials fired minority workers without redress, refused to promote blacks and Hispanics to supervisory roles, and did nothing to eliminate a hostile working environment.

Standing on the granite steps of the State Supreme Court in Mineola yesterday morning, the workers said they had been systematically passed over for promotions while those better-paying jobs went to white colleagues with less seniority.

Moreover, the workers said, some of their more vocal members were fired for petty reasons and endured racial epithets in the workplace. In one instance, a park worker said his supervisor had a plunger on display in his office window, painted brown and red, apparently in reference to Abner Louima, the Haitian immigrant who Federal prosecutors say was brutalized with a plunger handle by police officers in a Brooklyn precinct house last year.

The workers are seeking \$100 million in damages, and those who were fired are trying to recover lost wages and win reinstatement of their jobs, according to papers filed yesterday in Brooklyn in United States District Court for the Eastern District.

"They are trying to tell us we don't count," said Juan Gonzalez, 43, who worked for the town as a mechanic for 21 years without a promotion before he was fired earlier this year for being habitually late to his job.

"They are saying we are nobody



Associated Press

Keith Oliver, left, a former municipal employee in Huntington, N.Y., and Rick Ostrove, a lawyer, at a news conference yesterday in Mineola.

and we are never going to get ahead in this town," Mr. Gonzalez said.

Most of the workers are current and former employees of the Highway Department in this municipality of 200,000 people in eastern Suffolk County. They contend that the department has only five or six black supervisors out of 100 and has never hired a Hispanic in any supervisory role.

James Matthews, the Huntington town attorney, said that the workers who lost their jobs were fired for poor work skills — not racism — and that the town would vigorously fight the suit. "This lawsuit is not about equal opportunity," he said. "It's about lawyers and money and a handful of town employees with weak supervisory skills, poor work records, or who were terminated for abusive sick time or poor performance."

The percentage of blacks on the

town payroll is three times their share of the local population, Mr. Matthews said, adding that the Highway Department had promoted seven blacks to supervisory positions just last year.

Some Huntington officials disagree with the town's legal strategy, however. "We are playing a numbers game," said Councilman Steve Israel. "Instead of lawsuits, we should be implementing programs to stop these problems from recurring."

The town has had legal troubles concerning the Highway Department before. In 1985, the Attorney General sued the Town of Huntington, saying that minorities were only put into jobs as laborers. The town eventually settled later that year, paying \$200,000 to some minority workers and promising to institute an affirmative action program and investigate any complaint of discrimination in the workplace.