

Racism in the workplace not just confined to Collingwood Football Club

The recent review into systemic racism at Collingwood Football Club comes as no surprise to Zana Bytheway, Executive Director of employment rights community legal centre JobWatch, which has received over 1800 calls from workers experiencing racism at work.

JobWatch says that the racism experienced by Heritier Lumumba at Collingwood is not unique to the football world. Callers to its Telephone Information Service have reported not only physical or verbal abuse in the workplace, but also racist microaggressions that contribute to workers being treated unfavourably.

“Whatever form the racism takes, it has a significant impact on the individual,” says Ms. Bytheway. “When callers reach out to us, the systemic racism has negatively impacted their mental health and wellbeing. Many have seen counsellors, and some are making claims to WorkSafe about workplace bullying. Some even report suicide ideation because of the impact of the bullying.”

In 2021 alone, JobWatch has already taken 20 calls relating to racial discrimination at work. This includes the following calls:

- 40-year-old Filipino man who was physically and verbally attacked by co-workers telling him he doesn't belong in this country
- 21-year-old Sudanese woman being deliberately left out of team building activities and excluded from other workplace activities
- 37-year-old Pacific Islander woman who was called ‘n****’ and sexually harassed by another colleague
- 19-year-old First Nations man who was mocked at work because his employer didn't believe that he was Aboriginal

While 1800 calls are not an insignificant number, Ms. Bytheway is concerned that it may just be the tip of the iceberg.

“These are just the workers that we know about because they've actively called us. There are many more people out there who don't know where to turn to for help.”

“Unfortunately, not all workplaces can invest in external expert reviews of their company culture the way Collingwood has, but everyone has the right to a culturally safe workplace,” asserts Ms. Bytheway.

Ms. Bytheway refers to Division 4 of the Victorian Equal Opportunity Act 2010 which details ‘vicarious liability’. This section of the Act explains that if a person engages in discriminatory conduct during their employment then the employer is vicariously liable for the discriminatory conduct unless the employer took reasonable preventative precautions.

“It is clear that it is not enough not to be racist – workplaces should actively work to be anti-racist and that includes taking appropriate punitive measures against employees who are infringing on the rights of other employees,” she says.

“I must emphasise to all workers who are experiencing discrimination in the workplace, to seek immediate legal information by calling our Telephone Information Service on 1800 331 617 or 03 9662 1933.”

To support workers, JobWatch has developed a fact sheet about race discrimination available for download from their website: <http://jobwatch.org.au/publications>

Available for interview

- Zana Bytheway, Executive Director, JobWatch

Attachments

- JobWatch logo in high-res png
- Profile photo, Zana Bytheway

Contact

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About JobWatch

JobWatch is an independent, not-for-profit Employment Rights Community Legal Centre. We operate out of Victoria and assist Victorian, Queensland and Tasmanian workers with their rights at work. Some of our functions include:

- A free and confidential telephone information and referral service for Victorian, Queensland and Tasmanian workers.
- Community legal education, including training, seminars and the production of a variety of publications on employment law and workers' rights.
- Representation and assistance for disadvantaged workers through a legal casework practice.
- Campaign and law reform activity with a view to promoting workplace justice and equity for all workers.

For more information: www.jobwatch.org.au