

# Racism complaint valid, human rights body says

## But refers '03 case back to mediation

BY ANDREW HALFNIGHT, THE GAZETTE JULY 8, 2009

Six years after a black salesman filed a complaint against Les Ailes de la Mode for racial discrimination and harassment, Quebec's Human Rights Commission has ruled in his favour.

But Winston Wood's ordeal isn't over.

Wood complained to the commission in June 2003 after his supervisor made racial slurs and demoted him for no apparent reason. Although the commission found his complaint to be valid, it did not set an indemnity, choosing instead to refer the case back to mediation, where it could languish for several more months.

The parties had already engaged in an unsuccessful mediation in 2004.

"This is the 21st century; we're in Montreal," Wood said yesterday. "The delay in the case - waiting six years to have a judgment that effectively puts me back to square one - is confusing."

In August 2002, Wood signed a contract to sell high-end menswear at Les Ailes de la Mode in downtown Montreal for \$12.50 an hour. Even as the store hired more employees, Wood was twice demoted, had his hours cut by one-third and endured racial slurs from his supervisor, who once said, "Je suis tanné de travailler comme un nègre" during a staff meeting and introduced Wood to customers as "his little black twin brother," among other derogatory remarks.

After complaining to the store's human resources department, Wood said he was told he was "imagining things." He wrote a letter to the Human Rights Commission in 2003, beginning the six-year ordeal.

During the past six years, Wood's file sat untouched for up to 16 months at a time and was handled by five investigators. None of the witnesses in the case, including the supervisor, denied the allegations.

"I've never seen a case like this," said Fo Niemi, director of the Centre for Research-Action on Race Relations, which took on Wood's cause in 2006.

"You go to the Human Rights Commission, you may wait for six years, and then at the end all you get is a recommendation for more mediation."

Wood is seeking \$67,000 in damages and a letter of reference from the Les Ailes.

Les Ailes de la Mode could not be reached for comment yesterday.

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