

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT FOR THE NORTHERN DISTRICT OF
ILLINOIS, EASTERN DIVISION

Victoria Guster-Hines and Domineca Neal v. McDonald's USA, LLC,
McDonald's Corporation, Steven Easterbrook, Christopher
Kempczinski, and Charles Strong

Guster-Hines v. McDonald's · No. 20-cv-00117 · Decided March 17, 2026

SUMMARY

The United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois addresses the defendants’ motions for summary judgment in employment-discrimination litigation brought by Victoria Guster-Hines and Domineca Neal under 42 U.S.C. § 1981 and Title VII. The opinion discusses alleged race-based harassment, non-promotions, retaliation, workplace conduct, and the investigation preceding Neal’s termination. The court grants summary judgment in full to Christopher Kempczinski and McDonald’s Corporation, and grants summary judgment in part while denying it in part to Charles Strong and McDonald’s USA, LLC.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, Eastern Division
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Mary M. Rowland
JURISDICTION	United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, Eastern Division
DECIDED	March 17, 2026
DOCKET	20-cv-00117
DISPOSITION	other
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Plaintiffs brought race-discrimination, hostile-work-environment, and retaliation claims under 42 U.S.C. § 1981 and Title VII. Defendants moved for summary judgment.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	Summary judgment is appropriate when the evidence, viewed in the nonmoving party's favor, would not permit a reasonable factfinder to find for that party. For discrimination and retaliation claims, the court considered whether a reasonable factfinder could conclude that the plaintiff's protected characteristic or protected activity caused the

	adverse employment action. The court also applied the McDonnell Douglas framework where relevant.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	unpublished
PARTIES	Victoria Guster-Hines, Domineca Neal v. McDonald's USA, LLC, McDonald's Corporation, Steven Easterbrook, Christopher Kempczinski, Charles Strong

TOPICS

employment discrimination hostile work environment retaliation summary judgment civil rights

PRACTICE AREAS

employment law civil rights civil procedure evidence

QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether plaintiffs presented sufficient evidence to support disparate-treatment race-discrimination claims under § 1981 and Title VII based on Guster-Hines's alleged sidelining, the plaintiffs' non-promotions, and Neal's termination.
2. Whether Guster-Hines's paid leave and subsequent voluntary resignation constituted an adverse employment action supporting her discrimination or retaliation claims.
3. Whether Neal presented sufficient evidence that her termination was caused by retaliation for filing the discrimination lawsuit.
4. Whether plaintiffs presented sufficient evidence of severe or pervasive race-based harassment to proceed on hostile-work-environment claims.
5. Whether McDonald's Corporation, Kempczinski, and Strong could be held liable on the claims at issue.

HOLDINGS

1. Guster-Hines's mutually agreed paid leave, without evidence that defendants prevented her from returning, restricted her work in a manner that caused her skills to atrophy, or rejected a request to return, was not an adverse employment action.
2. Plaintiffs failed to establish viable disparate-treatment claims based on the challenged non-promotions. The record created a qualification dispute for Guster-Hines as to the FVP and VPF positions and for Neal as to the FVP position, but plaintiffs failed to identify relevant similarly situated comparators or evidence that the stated nondiscriminatory reasons were pretextual.
3. Neal failed to support her disparate-treatment claim based on termination because she identified neither a relevant comparator nor evidence that she was meeting legitimate expectations or that her termination was caused by race.
4. Neal presented sufficient evidence to proceed on her retaliation claim against McDonald's USA based on her termination.

5. Guster-Hines could not proceed on her retaliation claim because she identified no adverse employment action caused by protected activity.
6. Plaintiffs presented sufficient evidence for their hostile-work-environment claims to proceed against Strong and McDonald's USA.

KEY QUOTATIONS

“The parties agree that the Court’s inquiry comes down to one question: “Does the record contain sufficient evidence to permit a reasonable fact finder to conclude that retaliatory motive caused the materially adverse action?””

“The answer is no. At bottom, Plaintiffs’ non-promotion claims are premised on a belief that they were wrongfully denied positions”

“A reasonable factfinder may assess this timeline and determine that Neal was fired not because of her workplace conduct but instead because she filed a discrimination lawsuit against her employer.”

“The question is whether a reasonable jury could find that these comments were subjectively and objectively severe enough to alter the conditions of Plaintiffs’ work. The answer is yes.”

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Guster-Hines and Neal, both Black women, worked for McDonald's USA and held senior operations positions after a 2018 restructuring. Guster-Hines and Neal alleged that Strong referred to Black women as "angry Black women" and used the phrase "Black woman attitude," and that other executives made racially charged statements. After plaintiffs sent a discrimination demand letter and filed suit, McDonald's USA retained an outside lawyer to assess workplace complaints involving Neal and Guster-Hines; Neal was terminated after the assessment, while Guster-Hines remained on paid leave and later voluntarily resigned. Plaintiffs also challenged several non-promotions and asserted retaliation and hostile-work-environment claims.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Plaintiffs filed the original complaint on January 7, 2020. Easterbrook was voluntarily dismissed on April 3, 2025, and Kempczinski and McDonald's Corporation were dismissed from the litigation after summary judgment was granted on all claims against them. The court granted summary judgment in favor of all defendants on the disparate-treatment claims, granted McDonald's USA summary judgment on Guster-Hines's retaliation claim, denied summary judgment on Neal's retaliation claim against McDonald's USA, and denied summary judgment on the hostile-work-environment claims against Strong and McDonald's USA.

DISPOSITION

other

CASES CITED

- Laborers' Pension Fund v. Innovation Landscape, Inc., No. 15 CV 9580, 2019 WL 6699190, at *1 (N.D. Ill. Dec. 9, 2019)

- Kreg Therapeutics, Inc. v. VitalGo, Inc., 919 F.3d 405, 414 (7th Cir. 2019)
- Zuppari v. Wal-Mart Stores, Inc., 770 F.3d 644, 648 (7th Cir. 2014)
- Yanick v. Hanna Steel Corp., 653 F.3d 532, 544 (7th Cir. 2011)
- Reives v. Illinois State Police, 29 F.4th 887, 891 (7th Cir. 2022)
- Simpson v. Franciscan Alliance, Inc., 827 F.3d 656, 661 (7th Cir. 2016)
- Andrews v. CBOCS West, Inc., 743 F.3d 230, 234 (7th Cir. 2014)
- Brooks v. Avancez, 39 F.4th 424, 433 (7th Cir. 2022)
- Napier v. Orchard School Foundation, 137 F.4th 884, 892 (7th Cir. 2025)
- McKenzie v. Milwaukee County, 381 F.3d 619, 625 (7th Cir. 2004)
- Burlington Industries, Inc. v. Ellerth, 524 U.S. 742, 761 (1998)
- Traylor v. Brown, 295 F.3d 783, 788 (7th Cir. 2002)
- Dass v. Chicago Board of Education, 675 F.3d 1060, 1069 (7th Cir. 2012)
- Trahanas v. Northwestern University, 64 F.4th 842, 853 (7th Cir. 2023)
- Nichols v. Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville, 510 F.3d 722, 786-787 (7th Cir. 2007)
- Oszust v. Town of St. John, 212 F. Supp. 3d 770, 777 (N.D. Ind. 2016)
- Hill v. Potter, 625 F.3d 998, 1003 (7th Cir. 2010)
- Johnson v. Nordstrom, Inc., 260 F.3d 727, 732 (7th Cir. 2001)
- Olsen v. Marshall & Ilsley Corp., 267 F.3d 597, 602 (7th Cir. 2001)
- Bennett v. Roberts, 295 F.3d 687, 696 (7th Cir. 2002)
- Ekekhov v. AON Service Corp., No. 05C99, 2006 WL 2349982, at *6 (N.D. Ill. Aug. 9, 2006)
- Daniels v. Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, No. 98 C 1186, 2006 WL 861969, at *6 (N.D. Ill. Mar. 31, 2006), *aff'd sub nom. Baylie v. Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago*, 476 F.3d 522 (7th Cir. 2007)
- Grayson v. City of Chicago, 317 F.3d 745, 748 (7th Cir. 2003)
- Snipes v. Illinois Department of Corrections, 291 F.3d 460, 463 (7th Cir. 2002)
- Enriquez v. Johnson, No. 07 C 4589, 2008 WL 4671715, at *4 (N.D. Ill. Oct. 22, 2008)
- Turner v. Health Care Service Corp., No. 06 C 2399, 2009 WL 1210624, at *4 (N.D. Ill. May 4, 2009)
- Judson Atkinson Candies, Inc. v. Latini-Hohberger Dhimantec, 529 F.3d 371, 382 n.2 (7th Cir. 2008)
- Betco Corp., Ltd. v. Peacock, 876 F.3d 306, 309 (7th Cir. 2017)
- Stockwell v. City of Harvey, 597 F.3d 895, 901 (7th Cir. 2010)
- Castro v. DeVry University, Inc., 786 F.3d 559, 564 (7th Cir. 2015)
- Lesiv v. Illinois Central Railroad Co., 39 F.4th 903, 911 (7th Cir. 2022)
- Kidwell v. Eisenhauer, 679 F.3d 957, 966 (7th Cir. 2012)
- Ludlow v. Northwestern University, 79 F. Supp. 3d 824, 834 n.5 (N.D. Ill. 2015)
- Keeton v. Morningstar, Inc., 667 F.3d 877, 885-86 (7th Cir. 2012)
- Hobgood v. Illinois Gaming Board, 731 F.3d 635, 645 (7th Cir. 2013)
- Stephens v. Erickson, 569 F.3d 779, 787 (7th Cir. 2009)
- Lewis v. City of Chicago, 496 F.3d 645, 649-50, 653 (7th Cir. 2007)

- Geraty v. Village of Antioch, 941 F. Supp. 2d 918, 932 (N.D. Ill. 2013)
- Cole v. Board of Trustees of Northern Illinois University, 838 F.3d 888, 896 (7th Cir. 2016)
- Porter v. Erie Foods International, Inc., 576 F.3d 629, 634 (7th Cir. 2009)
- Faragher v. City of Boca Raton, 524 U.S. 775, 787 (1998)
- Racicot v. Wal-Mart Stores, Inc., 414 F.3d 675, 677-78 (7th Cir. 2005)
- McIver v. Bridgestone Americas, Inc., 42 F.4th 398, 413 (4th Cir. 2022)
- Curry v. Devereux Foundation, 541 F. Supp. 3d 555, 561 (E.D. Pa. 2021)
- Rodgers v. Western-Southern Life Insurance Co., 12 F.3d 668, 675 (7th Cir. 1993)
- Dochee v. Methodist Hospitals, Inc., No. 2:21-cv-275, 2024 WL 4345774, at *2-3 (N.D. Ind. 2024)
- Peterkin v. Taco Bell, No. 3:95-CV-694RM, 1996 WL 939573, at *5-6 (N.D. Ind. Nov. 20, 1996)
- Reed v. Tetra Tech, Inc., No. CIV-13-542, 2014 WL 931426, at *5 (W.D. Okla. Mar. 10, 2014)