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# Wolf ousts criticized head of Pa. Human Relations Commission

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Gerald S. Robinson has been ousted as chairman of the state Human Relations Commission.

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Writer

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The Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission, once a respected civil-rights agency, is on life support, according to current and former staffers.

Morale and funding are down, cases are piling up, and allegations of racism and discrimination have been lobbed at Gerald S. Robinson, a Gov. Tom Corbett appointee who had continued to head the agency under Gov. Wolf.

Until Tuesday.

Staffers were notified then that Wolf had abruptly removed Robinson as chairman.

Wolf spokesman Jeff Sheridan declined to comment other than to confirm that Joel Bolstein, a longtime commissioner and Bucks County lawyer, had been appointed interim chairman.

Robinson's ouster comes as the Inquirer and the Daily News were preparing to publish a story citing a slew of allegations against the agency. Ten current and former staffers have complained in recent weeks that the commission had been quietly gutted under Robinson, a Republican lawyer whom Corbett appointed as chairman in 2011.

The staffers allege that the commission - the target of at least three open civil-rights lawsuits - fosters some of the hostile working conditions and discriminatory hiring practices it is supposed to root out in the private sector.

"Gerry did not impress me as someone who had much patience for the plight of the underclass and the minorities we were charged to serve," said former Commissioner Sylvia Waters, whose term expired in 2014. "He did not seem to have any sympathy and patience, and he often talked about the protected classes with great disdain."

Robinson, managing partner in a Harrisburg law firm, dismissed the complaints Tuesday, saying the ex-employees have an ax to grind. He argued that he had sought to make the commission more efficient despite recent budget cuts.

"For someone to say I don't like black people, that's idiotic," said Robinson, who is black.

"All the facts belie it." He referred to his years of work with the Urban League, NAACP, and other organizations and community groups.

Robinson blamed a lack of funding for some of the problems at the agency, and said commissioners do not handle day-to-day operations. He added that even he was surprised that Wolf did not replace him last year when the Democratic governor took office.

The current and ex-staffers spoke on the condition they not be named for fear of retaliation or interference with their current jobs.

Kevin "Kaaba" Brunson, a former Harrisburg regional director of the commission, alleges in a lawsuit that Robinson used a racial epithet to refer to a black person and engaged in the "precise behavior that the PHRC was created to eradicate."

Waters said she had witnessed Robinson using that slur multiple times. Another commission staffer said he heard Robinson use the word *cracker* to refer to white people.

Brunson, who is black, says in his suit that Robinson continued to demonstrate "antiblack animus," telling attendees at a November 2011 dinner that "there were too many blacks who had been employed at the commission, especially when compared to the demographics in the state of Pennsylvania."

Kathryn Waters-Perez, a former assistant chief counsel at the PHRC, contends in her lawsuit that Robinson "acted with the specific goal of filling the executive director position with a nonminority candidate." After a white woman was selected for that position, the suit alleges, Robinson "continued to make statements that he did not want minorities to fill leadership positions within the commission."

Those who have worked or socialized with Robinson liken him to Clarence Thomas, the conservative U.S. Supreme Court justice, who chaired the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission under President Ronald Reagan.

Robinson would "say things that would make you cringe coming out of the mouth of the chair of a civil-rights agency," said a former commissioner staffer, referring to his philosophy that minorities need to simply pull themselves up by their bootstraps. "The way he puts that forth is in a really offensive way and discounts people's suffering."

Jelani Cooper, an assistant chief counsel, has filed an Equal Employment Opportunity Commission complaint alleging "pervasive" discrimination at the commission.

"When you look at it, all the top-level managers, they're all Caucasian," Cooper said. "We're a civil-rights organization. We encourage diversity in workplaces and

educational institutions throughout the state, but we haven't made it a priority for our upper-level managers at the commission."

Meanwhile, commission staffers and outside lawyers say the agency under Robinson has become more sympathetic to employers and other respondents of complaints.

"There's been a real change in the commission to marginalizing complaints, to the point that they stopped allowing Philadelphia to take walk-in complaints," a former commission staffer said.

Tuesday afternoon, the Philadelphia regional office in Chinatown was empty. The office no longer has staffers available to process complaints in person. Instead, complainants must fill out a form, which is available only in English.

"It's a ghost town there," another former staffer said of the Philadelphia office. "We're not really serving the people."

Jeffrey Campolongo, an attorney who represents victims of workplace discrimination, said that in the last two years he has tried to avoid taking cases before the commission because it tends to side with employers.

"It's supposed to vindicate the rights of employees," Campolongo said.

Harold Goldner, an attorney who represents employees and employers before the commission, said the commission appears to be "overworked and understaffed."

Goldner said that when he files a case on behalf of an employee alleging discrimination, "I generally expect that it's going to get kicked or I'm going to have to ask for the right to sue." Conversely, when Goldner is representing employers who are responding to a complaint, "I'm almost always able to secure a dismissal," he said.

That comes as no surprise to Hesham Eldeib, an Egyptian-born mechanical engineer, who filed a complaint with the commission alleging that two employees at Mack Trucks Inc. ran him out of a job and repeatedly accused him of being a terrorist.

"They called me a [obscenity] Arab and [that I] came to America to kill people," Eldeib, 56, of Allentown, said of the Mack employees.

Eldeib filed a complaint with the commission in 2012 after he lost his job. He included sketches, witness testimony, and a police report that cleared him. Two years later, the commission dismissed his case. He appealed. Last month, it was denied again.

"They need to see some blood on my face to believe me? What can I do?" Eldeib asked.

Eldeib said he thinks he was victimized by bigoted coworkers only to be victimized again by a commission that wouldn't conduct a thorough investigation.

"I feel depression, that's what I feel," he said. "They destroyed me twice."

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