

Man pickets former local job

BY KENT JACKSON / PUBLISHED: JULY 2, 2020



WARREN RUDA / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER Kevin Chase has been picketing outside of the InSteel Wire Products plant in Humboldt Industrial Park, Hazle Twp.

Kevin Chase described how he felt the first time a co-worker used the “N-word” in his presence at Insteel Wire Products, where he has been picketing since being fired.

"It was the worst thing," said Chase, who is Black and wondered, "This is OK here?"

Chase said the man who used the profanity in February wasn't addressing him. Rather, he was referring to Colin Kaepernick, the former NFL quarterback who notably knelt for the national anthem before games during the 2016 season.

When Chase reported the conversation to the company's human relations director, he didn't want his co-worker fired.

"I said, 'I don't want to be a pariah.' I was forgiving. I thought maybe this was a one-off," Chase recalled.

He thought Insteel might offer sensitivity training at the plant in Humboldt Industrial Park, which makes wire mesh for concrete construction.

"I was expecting outrage — We can't let this happen," Chase said.

Instead Chase said the HR manager nixed sensitivity training.

Jim Petelle, an Insteel vice president, however, said the company did offer sensitivity training, although Chase might not have known about it because he was on leave. Also, Insteel disciplined the employee, who apologized profusely the next day, Petelle said.

Chase, in contrast, said the man "became horrible once he realized he was safe after that." Others in the factory started calling that worker "the Imperial Wizard."

Rather than lunching with that man and other maintenance workers, Chase began eating with general plant workers.

Two months later, another employee blurted out the N-word in an incident that Chase also reported to his HR manager. Petelle, who is at the company's headquarters in Mount Airy, North Carolina, hadn't heard about the second incident.

It happened when an employee went to a restaurant to pick up lunches and texted that he was an "N-boy" when the lunches weren't ready on time.

Inside the plant, a worker receiving the text laughed and "oblivious to life," read the message aloud, Chase said.

He doesn't think the company took any action on that complaint.

'It's a real issue'

Nicky Trovitch, who drives past Insteel on her commute in Humboldt, said seeing Chase holding his sign brings home issues raised across the nation in protests following the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor.

"If people feel it's OK to say racial slurs, whether public or private, I feel it's a real issue. We're supposed to protect people," said Trovitch, adding that employers and coworkers have an obligation to help "every individual feel comfortable and be who they are."

The plant's HR manager checked back with Chase to make sure he was OK after the first incident, Petelle said.

"In any case, it did not have any bearing on his termination or his confrontation with his supervisor," Petelle said.

The use of the N-word twice and what Chase perceived as the company's weak response to his complaints didn't directly relate to his firing.

But they were in his mind June 25 when his boss scolded him in front of other workers.

Nowhere to turn

Production had stopped, and Chase, an electronics technician, was above the shop floor, troubleshooting the problem.

He came down to talk with his boss, who was gesturing and asking what the problem was and if he had to call in an electrical company.

"My boss was very disrespectful, jumping down my throat," Chase said.

Thinking that HR wouldn't help, Chase made a decision.

"I'll just handle it."

He yelled back at his boss with profanity and was suspended.

On Monday, during a meeting, his employers said he could return to work.

"I'm asking, 'What's going to change? I don't want my boss being as rude as he can be, so how am I going to do my job?'" he said.

The company countered with an offer of three weeks' salary and uncontested access to unemployment payments if Chase would sign termination papers, which he refused to do.

Chase said he no longer works at Insteel, but the men who used the profanity remain on the job.

Polarizing

The N-word is deeply polarizing, Chad Dion Lassiter, executive director of the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission, said.

"When looking at racial and ethnic intimidation specifically with this word, the intent wasn't just, 'Hey buddy,'" Lassiter said. "We know the N-word does something."

Speaking in general terms, Lassiter said companies should implement policies and not tolerate speech that is transphobic, homophobic or that demeans people because of race, ethnicity or religion.

"I think all companies, when they get an initial report, should be more than proactive. They should begin investigating," he said. "There needs to be a policy (for) what happens to workers who engage in any xenophobia."

Lassiter said all companies have workers with unconscious biases, which if unaddressed can lead to animosity.

"We don't want people taking things into their own hands. We don't want them working in an environment" where no one is "addressing their immediate claims," he said. "We don't want bosses nor their subordinates to be in conflict when there are human relations persons who should be dealing with it."

At Insteel, Petelle said the company has robust policies for dealing with discrimination and provides periodic training.

"We seek to avoid that kind of incident (and) any kind of threatening behavior or language whatever," Petelle said.

In 14 years at Insteel, Petelle doesn't recall another event like Chase described occurring at any of the company's 10 plants across the country.

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