

McDonald's hit with sexual harassment complaint

● The document cites witness testimony of "attempted rape, indecent exposure, groping, and sexual offers"

● McDonald's said it would review the complaint

● Last year, the firm fired its CEO Steve Easterbrook for having a consensual relationship with a staff

AFP | Washington



Delivery riders queue outside a McDonald's in London; the company is facing a sexual harassment complaint filed at the OECD by an international coalition of labor unions

An international group of labor unions said Monday it has filed a complaint against McDonald's for what it called systematic sexual harassment at the fast food chain's restaurants around the world.

The complaint, filed at the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)'s offices in the Netherlands, was the first of its kind to target a multinational company, its authors said.

"McDonald's workers have sounded the alarm about sexual harassment and gender-based violence for years, but a company with a culture rotten from the top has failed to take meaningful action to address the problem," Sue Longley, general secretary of the International Union of Foodworkers, said in a statement.

"Because McDonald's has neglected to act to create a safe workplace, the Dutch government should make use of this complaint to empower workers to effectively address the

rampant harassment they face under the Golden Arches," she said.

The complaint also targets two investment banks, APG Asset Management of the Netherlands and Norges Bank of Norway, which together have holdings worth \$1.7 billion in the food giant.

The complainants noted that the OECD's own guidelines "require due diligence by institutional shareholders in companies to ensure responsible business conduct."

The unions said it was the "first-ever complaint brought to the OECD to take aim at systematic sexual harassment at a multinational company."

'McDonald's culture'

The document cites witness testimony of "attempted rape, indecent exposure, groping, and sexual offers."

It said the victims, some as young as 16, "said they were ignored, mocked, or punished when they reported it. Some had their hours cut back and others were fired."

It also cited cases of "touching, forced kissing and other forms of unwanted bodily contact" in branches of the food chain in numerous countries including the United States, Britain, Australia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and France, among others. In France, it cited a case in which a McDonald's manager allegedly "installed a cellphone camera in the women's changing room, and secretly filmed young women changing their clothes."

"Gender-based violence and harassment is part of McDonald's culture," the complaint alleged.

McDonald's said in a statement it would review the complaint when it had received it, stressing that the food giant is a "people-first company."

"There is a deeply important conversation around safe and respectful workplaces in communities throughout the US and around the world," the company said.

"Around the world we believe that McDonald's and its business partners have a responsi-

bility to take action on this issue and are committed to promoting positive change," it added.

Last year, the firm fired its CEO Steve Easterbrook for having a consensual relationship with a member of staff in violation of company policy.

The complaint will be examined by the Dutch government, which has up to three months to decide whether to launch a process of mediation with the company.

The OECD does not have the power to fine or penalize the company, said Lance Compa, an expert on international labor law.

But the complainants hope mediation "could lead to an agreement and a template for McDonald's operations around the world," and in particular to allow "workers to bring their own experiences and ideas to the table to help shape policies to combat harassment and gender-based violence."

The unions, which include the European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism Trade Unions and the Service Employees International Union of the United States and Canada, said they brought the case in the Netherlands because in the United States, where the company is headquartered, McDonald's "insists it has no responsibility for employment conditions, employment relations, or workplace abuses in the more than 90 percent of its stores operated by franchisees."

The unions chose the Netherlands because it is the "nerve center" of the fast food giant's European operations, and also the headquarters of APG bank.

McDonald's is the largest restaurant chain in Europe, where it employs almost 500,000 people, 90 percent of them working in franchises.

Australia threatens WTO action as dispute with China deepens



Sydney

Australia threatened yesterday to take China to the World Trade Organisation to counter a fresh round of punitive sanctions, as the two countries clashed over an investigation into the origins and spread of the coronavirus.

Canberra said it may seek remedial action to overturn almost 81 percent in tariffs on barley exports -- the latest in a series of Chinese sanctions that many believe are politically motivated.

Beijing on Monday announced the measures -- earmarked to last five years -- after finding Australian subsidies and dumping had "substantially damaged domestic industry".

Both sides have insisted that barley is a technical trade issue, and Australian officials

have played down fears of a trade war, saying there would be no "tit-for-tat" response.

"To say that I'm disappointed is an understatement," agriculture minister David Littleproud said.

"This is something that we will strongly reject, the premise that the Australian barley farmer is subsidised in any way, shape or form."

"We will now work through the determination by Chinese officials, calmly and methodically, and reserve our right to go to the World Trade Organisation to get the independent umpire to make that determination."

The move has worsened a relationship that has become increasingly troubled as Beijing has become more assertive in flexing its growing military, economic and diplomatic power in the Asia-Pacific region.

US auto plants get back to work after COVID-19 halts

Warren | United States

Two months after effectively freezing American auto manufacturing, Detroit's "Big Three" on Monday began to get back to business with masks, temperature checks and social distancing protocols to try to prevent coronavirus outbreaks.

Some hourly workers have expressed concerns about the risks of assembly line activity, where staff traditionally have worked side-by-side. But automakers say they will be able to work while practicing social distancing and taking other measures to protect workers.

The resumption brings a burst of fresh economic activity across states in the midwestern United States, a key swing area in the upcoming elections.

Australia watchdog suggests news boycott of Google, Facebook

AFP | Sydney

Australia's competition watchdog suggested Tuesday that local media could organise a "collective boycott" of Google and Facebook to force the tech giants to pay for news they put on their platforms.

The radical idea was among a series of possible bargaining tools put forward by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) as it considers a mandatory code of conduct for the tech firms.

Other mechanisms laid out in a 33-page "Concepts Paper" included bilateral negotiations between Australian media organisations and the two tech behemoths and collective bargaining involving all the country's news companies.

But acknowledging the global reach and immense power of Google and Facebook, it said an "alternative bargaining framework" could be needed if direct negotiations fail.

"A collective boycott, or the threat of a collective boycott, may encourage each of Google and Facebook to offer news me-



Google says it has invested heavily in initiatives helping Australia's struggling news industry

dia businesses more appropriate remuneration for the use of their content," it said.

In a process being closely watched across the world,

Australia last month announced plans to force major internet firms to share advertising revenues earned from news content featured in their services.

While the initial targets of the anti-trust move involved a range of tech firms, including Twitter and Verizon Media, the ACCC said Tuesday it was narrowing

its focus to Google and Facebook.

"Facebook and Google were the digital platforms currently benefitting from a significant imbalance in bargaining power in their commercial negotiations with Australian news media businesses," it said.

The ACCC is tasked with drawing up a "code of conduct" for payments and addressing other competition concerns with the tech titans.

Its concept paper posed a series of questions about what kind of news should be compensated and how best to determine its value, and gave stakeholders until June 5 to submit recommendations.

The ACCC then has until the end of July to draw up the final code, which the government has said it will quickly implement.

Industry struggling

Last week the head of Nine Entertainment, one of Australia's biggest media companies, called for Google and Facebook to pay news organisations 10 percent of their annual Austral-

ian advertising revenue, which is estimated by the government at Aus\$6.0 billion (US\$3.9 billion).

Other industry leaders have suggested payments of up to Aus\$1.0 billion per year.

Google and Facebook vehemently oppose any mandatory fees and insist they have invested millions of dollars in initiatives helping Australia's struggling news industry.

The two firms have had a huge impact on media companies across the globe as they capture the lion's share of online advertising spending.

In response to falling revenues, Australian news outlets have slashed 20 percent of jobs in the last six years.

The crisis has only deepened in the economic and advertising downturn caused by the coronavirus pandemic, which has already forced the closure of many smaller news publishers.

An estimated 17 million Australians use Facebook each month and spend an average of 30 minutes on the platform a day, while 98 percent of Australian mobile searches use Google.