

Lakers Now

Round-the-clock purple and gold

Fernando Gonzalez's Lakers suit: Does 'equal pay for equal work' hold up?

By **ERIC PINCUS**

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The lawyers for longtime Lakers Spanish-language radio play-by-play announcer Fernando Gonzalez held a news conference on behalf of their client on Friday outside of Los Angeles County Superior Court.

"He's a dedicated individual, dedicated to the Lakers, dedicated to the Lakers family," said attorney Lisa Maki of Gonzalez. "He suffered pretty brutal, racial segregation."

Gonzalez has **filed a complaint** against the Lakers, and partner Time Warner Cable, claiming he has been treated "differently from and less favorably than his Anglo-American counterparts in terms of wages, hours and conditions of employment."

"The more he complained, the more he was retaliated against," said Maki of Gonzalez's increasing struggles, specifically over the last three years. "The last time he brought up these complaints, he lost a bunch of games [and] he lost a bunch of income, and that's not right. It's illegal. It's unfair and it's unjust."

Gonzalez is paid a lower salary than the Lakers' English-language team of John Ireland and Mychal Thompson.

"They pay him a different rate," said attorney Genie Harrison. "The Caucasian announcers are making like \$300,000 whereas he's making \$120,000. I think you have to realize the daily humiliation of working for an organization where you know you're being paid less than your equal counterparts, that's a lot to deal with for years and years and years."

According to Leonard Simon, a San Diego-based attorney with Robbins, Geller, Rudman & Dowd, and adjunct professor at the University of San Diego, Gonzalez might have a case if he can show the Lakers treated him poorly, based on his heritage.

"He has to prove they didn't treat him well, and it was due to his ethnicity," said Simon, who spoke to The Times after reading Gonzalez' complaint, but is not associated with the broadcaster or his legal counsel.

""Equal pay for equal work' may not hold up, because they have no one doing equal work to compare him with," said Simon. "Comparing Gonzalez to the English-language broadcasters -- they just don't have comparable jobs. The English-language stations make a lot more money, have bigger audiences and generate more sponsorships."

The team's ESPN 710 AM broadcast brought in 461,700 listeners over the brief two weeks of April, according to Nielson ratings. The numbers for Spanish-language ESPN Deportes 1330 AM were not available, but are significantly less than the English counterpart.

Maki doesn't view audience size as relevant.

"I don't believe so, no. Look at the Latino, Hispanic market, it's so big," said Maki. "He's doing the exact same thing, but he's being paid way less."

The Lakers recently released a statement in response to the Gonzalez claim.

"We do not believe these allegations have any merit, and would like to point out that the majority of our broadcasters are people of color," read the statement. "Furthermore, the Lakers were the first team in the NBA to conduct full-time radio broadcasts in Spanish, which began 20 years ago.

"During the 2012-13 season, we became the first team to have a separate TV broadcast network (TWC Deportes) to televise games in Spanish. Although these initiatives have financially been minimally profitable to us, we feel they've been extremely successful to us in terms of providing a desired and needed service to a large part of our fan base."

Gonzalez is under contract with the team through the 2014-15 season.

"We believe his damages exceed \$1 million but that's for the jury to decide," said Maki. "It's not like he wants to win the lottery. He just wants what he was entitled to -- what the Caucasian announcers receive."

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