

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE DISTRICT OF DELAWARE

Dannette G. McLaughlin)
)
 Plaintiff,)
)
 v.) C.A. No. 03-617 (GMS)
)
 Diamond State Port Corp.)
)
 Defendant.)

MEMORANDUM

I. INTRODUCTION

Presently before the court is plaintiff Dannette McLaughlin’s Motion For Leave To File Her Amended Complaint. (D.I. 34.) In McLaughlin’s original complaint, filed July 1, 2003, she alleged one count of unlawful gender discrimination in violation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, *as amended*, 42 U.S.C. § 2000e *et seq.* (“Title VII”), and one count of unequal pay in violation of the Equal Pay Act, 29 U.S.C. § 206 (1998). (D.I. 1.) She now seeks to amend by adding a retaliation claim under Title VII, and an equal protection claim under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 (2003). (D.I. 34.) Because McLaughlin has unduly delayed her request to amend, and because of the undue prejudice to the defendant that would result from an amendment, McLaughlin’s motion will be denied.

II. JURISDICTION

The court has jurisdiction pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1331 (1993).

III. BACKGROUND

As of the time the complaint was filed, McLaughlin had been a part-time employee of Diamond State Port Corp. (“Diamond State”) for six years. (D.I. 1 ¶¶ 12-13.) From September 2000 through May 2002, McLaughlin applied for various full-time positions with Diamond State. (Id.

¶ 18.) However, she was unsuccessful in her bid to become full time and each position for which she applied was eventually filled by a man. (Id. ¶ 20.) Although Diamond State proffered nondiscriminatory reasons for not hiring McLaughlin (id. ¶¶ 21, 26), she has reason to believe gender discrimination to be the true reason (id. ¶¶ 21-42). As a result, McLaughlin filed a Charge of Discrimination with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (“the EEOC”) on May 28, 2002. (D.I. 34 Ex. A.) On April 3, 2003, the EEOC issued McLaughlin a right-to-sue letter. (Id. Ex. B.) She then proceeded to file suit against Diamond State and the International Longshoreman’s Assoc. on July 1, 2003.¹ (D.I. 1.) A scheduling conference was held on February 25, 2004 during which the court set the deadline for amendments to the pleadings to be April 30, 2004. The discovery deadline was set at August 31, 2004, and the deadline for case-dispositive motions was set at September 14, 2004. (D.I. 17.)

On July 29, 2004, McLaughlin signed a second EEOC Charge of Discrimination in which she alleges Diamond State retaliated against her for filing the first discrimination charge by passing her over for promotion. (D.I. 39 Ex. C.) The second charge is based on McLaughlin’s assertion that Diamond State supervisor William Stansberry told James Woolford, who told Malik Davidum, who told McLaughlin, that “because [she] put this suit out, that [she’ll] never get a job.” (McLaughlin Dep. at 165:16-166:6, D.I. 39 Ex. D.) McLaughlin was issued another right-to-sue letter on September 20. (D.I. 34 Ex. D.) In the meantime, on August 30 plaintiff’s counsel informed counsel for Diamond State of McLaughlin’s intention to amend the complaint to add the retaliation and § 1983 claims:

Please be advised that plaintiff has filed a new EEOC charge alleging retaliation. As soon as we receive the right to sue, we will be filing a Motion to

¹International Longshoreman’s Assoc. was dismissed as a defendant and only Diamond State remains. (Order of the Court, January 16, 2004.)

Amend the Complaint. In addition, as discovery has revealed the Port to be a “state actor,” we will also be adding a claim under 42 U.S.C. § 1983. I wanted you to be aware of these issues before our Conference with Judge Sleet currently scheduled for September 1, 2004 at 9:00 a.m.

I am on trial this week and will be difficult to reach. Please leave me a message if you have any questions and I will try to return your call before September 1, 2004. Thank you.

(August 30, 2004 Letter from Plaintiff’s Attorney to Defendant’s Attorney, D.I. 34 Ex. 2.)

Diamond State replied the same day:

I received your letter of today in which you noted that McLaughlin intends to move to amend her complaint to add a claim or [sic] retaliation and a section 1983 claim. You closed your letter by asking that I call if I have any questions. I will do so now. I am writing as well in the event that you are carrying a Blackberry. The schedule entered by the court provides that the time to amend pleadings expired over 4 months ago. Obviously we will oppose any effort on the of [sic] McLaughlin to amend her pleadings to add additional, baseless claims. In all events, if you intend to raise this issue with the Court in any substantive manner at the September 1 teleconference, please send me a detailed email identifying what exactly you intend to present so that I can be prepared to respond.

(August 30, 2004 Email from Defendant’s Attorney to Plaintiff’s Attorney, D.I. 41 Ex. C.)

The teleconference referenced in the above correspondence actually took place on September 3, and resulted in a revised scheduling order. In particular, the court acceded to the parties’ requests to move the discovery deadline to October 1 and the deadline for case-dispositive motions to October 18. (D.I. 26.) No mention of McLaughlin’s desire to amend her complaint was made to the court by either party.

Pursuant to the amended scheduling order, McLaughlin was deposed on September 28. At her deposition, counsel for Diamond State requested a copy of the second EEOC Charge. (D.I. 41 at 8-9.) It was provided on October 8, along with an offer to make McLaughlin available for another deposition. (Id. Ex. A.) According to McLaughlin, Diamond State declined to re-depose her. (Id. at 9.) McLaughlin filed the present motion on October 14 (D.I. 34), and Diamond State filed a

motion for summary judgment as to the claims in the original complaint on October 18 (D.I. 36.)

A pre-trial conference in this case is scheduled for January 5, 2005, and trial is scheduled for January 24, 2005.

IV. DISCUSSION

Bearing in mind that leave to amend a pleading is to “be freely given,” Fed. R. Civ. P. 15(a), it is within the discretion of the court to deny leave where a party will be substantially or unduly prejudiced, or where the court finds “bad faith or dilatory motives, truly undue or unexplained delay, repeated failures to cure the deficiency by amendments previously allowed, or futility of amendment,” *Lorenz v. CSX Corp.*, 1 F.3d 1406, 1413-14 (3d Cir. 1993).

As to McLaughlin’s § 1983 claim, the court is truly at a loss as to how it escaped counsel for McLaughlin that Diamond State is a state actor. Diamond State correctly points out that McLaughlin should have been alerted to this fact by the reference to Del. Code Ann., tit. 29, § 8735(a) (2003), in Diamond State’s answer, filed on July 15, 2003 (D.I. 4 ¶ 3). Section 8735(a) states:

There shall be established within the Department of State a body corporate and politic, with corporate succession, constituting a public instrumentality of the State, and created for the purpose of exercising essential governmental functions which is to be known as the “Diamond State Port Corporation.”

Thus, McLaughlin should have discovered Diamond State’s status as a state actor as soon as counsel read the answer and did even cursory research as to its substance. Either this research did not happen, or counsel did not realize the potential for a § 1983 claim. Moreover, the court finds it difficult to believe McLaughlin worked for Diamond State for six years without knowing it is an arm of the State of Delaware. It is noteworthy that McLaughlin’s submissions are conspicuously vague in outlining the reasons for this oversight. The only concrete explanation for delay the court can discern from the briefs is that McLaughlin “delayed raising the § 1983 [sic] until the retaliation

claim had perfected in order to avoid a multiplicity of amendment motions.” (D.I. 41 at 10.) Yet McLaughlin did not sign her second EEOC complaint until July 29, 2004, which was over one year after she was put on notice of Diamond State’s status as a state actor. The court doubts counsel really thought it was proper to sit idly on its § 1983 claim for over a year (allowing the deadline for amendments to pass) in anticipation of a retaliation claim. Therefore, the court accords very little weight to McLaughlin’s justification for the extraordinary delay in seeking to add the § 1983 claim.

As to the retaliation claim, the court is sympathetic to the plight of the employee who is retaliated against by her employer after the deadline for amendments to the pleadings has passed. Indeed, had McLaughlin’s counsel raised the amendment issue at the September 3 teleconference, the court would have given it serious consideration (especially since the whole purpose of the teleconference was to amend the scheduling order). Instead, counsel chose to be inconsiderate of the court’s time and burden it with lengthy, eleventh-hour briefing on an issue that could have been disposed at the teleconference with relative ease. Furthermore, counsel offers no excuse for this failure other than to say the defendant requested the issue not be brought up at the teleconference. Based on the defendant’s email of August 30, Diamond State merely requested details of the proposed amendment in order to properly prepare his response for the teleconference. Certainly, this was not an unreasonable request. Counsel for McLaughlin argues that such a request was, in fact, unreasonable because counsel for the defendant knew counsel for the plaintiff was on trial and would be unable to respond to a request for details. (D.I. 41 at 9.) In other words, McLaughlin’s counsel sprung notification of amendment on Diamond State on the eve of the teleconference, and then condemns Diamond State for not accommodating counsel’s busy trial schedule. It goes without saying that McLaughlin’s position is untenable. Even further undermining her argument is the fact that the teleconference was actually delayed by two days (from September 1 to September 3), giving

McLaughlin ample opportunity to fulfill Diamond State's request for details.

McLaughlin also argues that delay was necessary because she needed to receive a right-to-sue letter before seeking to amend. (Id. at 8.) However, McLaughlin fails to account for the fact that she could have sought leave to amend *before* the end of discovery. She received her right-to-sue letter on September 20, which was eight days before her own deposition and ten days before the end of discovery. Knowing of the impending deadlines, McLaughlin should have been fully prepared to file her motion to amend immediately upon receiving the letter. Instead she delayed until October 14, just two business days before the deadline for case-dispositive motions.

Another explanation is offered in a footnote:

Plaintiff notes as well that much of the evidence of retaliation was not developed until very recently, after defendant first withheld and then provide [sic] documents and required that plaintiff return to depose a witness about issues on which Defendant prohibited discovery in prior depositions. See, Markow deposition (Affidavit of Laurence V. Cronin ("Cronin Aff.") at Ex. B). Indeed, it was not until Stansbury's deposition in September that defendant finally acknowledged that there had been promotions subsequent to the EEOC charge being filed, having failed to provide any documentation regarding those promotions and assured counsel that there was none. See Stansbury deposition (Cronin Aff. at Ex. D).

(D.I. 41 at 1 n.2.) This explanation is inadequate for two reasons. First and foremost, McLaughlin obviously had enough information to file a charge with the EEOC in July 2004. Thus, it was not a discovery problem that prevented her from seeking to amend her complaint. Second, the above footnote asks the court to draw inferences from three deposition transcripts with no pinpoint cites. The two Markow depositions total 220 pages and the Stansbury deposition is 137 pages. Counsel once again shows its disregard for the court's time by asking it to sift through 357 pages of testimony to find evidence of dilatory tactics. It is counsel's responsibility to point the court to relevant evidence. Consequently, the court does not accept McLaughlin's explanation for the delay in seeking to add her retaliation claim.

Another consideration in deciding whether to permit an amendment is prejudice to the defendant. Although Diamond State does not explicitly argue this point, the court finds implicit prejudice. The purpose of a scheduling order is to provide concrete deadlines on which the parties can rely in planning their respective litigation strategies. If the court were to permit parties to ignore these deadlines, unfair surprise would abound.

In this case, briefing on McLaughlin's motion was completed on November 1. Even if the court would have decided the motion that day, Diamond State would have required time to file another answer. Additionally, it is quite likely that more discovery would have been necessary.² With the schedule now so compressed, it is likely that the filing of dispositive motions would have been precluded by the court or the time for trial postponed. Clearly, the loss to the defendant of the opportunity to achieve summary disposition of the matter or the delay resulting from an accommodation of the plaintiff's request to amend would be prejudicial to Diamond State.

V. CONCLUSION

Since McLaughlin does not adequately explain the prolonged delay in filing her motion to amend, and since permitting such an amendment would impose undue prejudice on Diamond State, the court will deny her motion.

Dated: December 21, 2004

Gregory M. Sleet
UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE

²McLaughlin disagrees that more discovery would be necessary. She is clearly mistaken. For instance, her main piece of retaliation evidence is at least double hearsay. Although Stansbury's statement may be non-hearsay as an admission of a party opponent, Fed. R. Evid. 801(d)(2), the statement would only become admissible if Woolford testified, or if there were an applicable exception for Woolford's recital of Stansbury's statement to Davidum and for Davidum's recital of Woolford's statement to McLaughlin. Thus, it seems most likely that Woolford would need to be deposed.

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Plaintiff,)	
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v.)	C.A. No. 03-617 (GMS)
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Diamond State Port Corp.)	
)	
Defendant.)	

ORDER

IT IS HEREBY ORDERED that:

The plaintiff's Motion For Leave To File Her Amended Complaint (D.I. 34) be DENIED.

Dated: December 21, 2004

Gregory M. Sleet
UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE