

New Jersey teenager fired from Five Guys for allegedly insulting police officers

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A worker was fired from his job last month at Five Guys after allegedly insulting police officers who had come into the hamburger franchise in Howell Township, New Jersey. The 17-year-old employee reportedly referred to the officers as “pigs” or “piggies” and added “Get the pork” or a similar expression. Other employees, including the manager on duty, laughed at these comments, suggesting a certain agreement or sympathy with them.

But then the manager on duty telephoned District Manager Cortney Pechillo, who demanded that the employee be fired. Pechillo insisted on staying on the phone until the termination had been carried out and the employee had left the restaurant.

It bears noting that Pechillo immediately accepted the manager’s report as true. She did not attempt to corroborate the story before firing the employee. She freely admitted to *NJ.com* that she was not sure what the employee had actually said. It was enough that he allegedly had “mouthed off,” as she put it. In her view, the worker was “a stupid kid saying something he shouldn’t have. I’ve been here 11 years and I don’t run the company this way.”

There are also indications that the firing of the youth may have been done as a direct reaction to a post on Facebook by police supporters.

The teenager had worked at the Five Guys for about a year. “We never had any issues with him. He was a good worker,” owner Stephen Gilmartin said in an interview with *Asbury Park Press*. “To say we were surprised is the understatement of a lifetime. He was one of those kids you would never expect anything like this from.” Yet Gilmartin immediately believed the accusation, which weighed more heavily for him than the employee’s year of reliable service.

After firing the employee and denouncing his alleged

behavior, Pechillo and Gilmartin went out of their way to praise and mollify the police. On the following morning, they visited police headquarters and had what Howell Police Chief Andrew Kudrick called a “meaningful” conversation. This meeting was merely the beginning of Pechillo and Gilmartin’s overtures to the police. Pechillo later wrote an apology to the town’s whole police force. She and Gilmartin also asked Kudrick for permission to release a public statement condemning the employee’s alleged behavior and expressing the company’s firm support for the police. Having violated their employee’s right to free speech, they apparently forgot their own right to issue a statement without police approval.

One could reasonably consider this response excessive, but it continued even further. Pechillo invited Kudrick to lunch and gave him the opportunity to talk to the manager on duty at the time of the alleged incident. Likely intimidated by the police chief, his boss, and the teenager’s abrupt dismissal, the manager explained his previous laughter as a reaction of shock and discomfort. “It was a great conversation between all of us,” said Kudrick.

The remaining employees at the Five Guys will undergo “training” in response to the alleged incident, Gilmartin told the *Asbury Park Press*. Furthermore, Pechillo hosted a fundraiser for the police officers at the restaurant, the proceeds of which were donated to the Howell Policemen’s Benevolent Association.

It doesn’t seem to have occurred to any of those involved that the teenager had a First Amendment right to express his opposition to the police. Nor did anyone realize that deep social inequality, and the behavior of the police themselves, encourage dislike, distrust, and fear of the police.

Fewer than three months before the alleged incident

at Five Guys, a Howell police officer killed Charles Tsakiris Jr. a 38-year-old man who was apparently suffering from a mental illness. The incident began when the police department received a 911 call from a man who said that he had been stabbed by his brother and was dying.

When an officer arrived at the residence, the door was opened by Tsakiris who wearing only underwear and holding a blade. He came out of the house mumbling, and the officer yelled at the man to back up. Walking forward, Tsakiris mumbled about having killed someone, and the police officer continued to yell, “Back up!” The encounter lasted only 11 seconds before the officer fired several rounds at the man. The officer had never ordered the man to drop the blade, nor had he warned him that he would shoot. As he lay dying, several officers tried to handcuff Tsakiris. A former Marine and Iraq War veteran, he was pronounced dead at the scene.

The Howell police also have been known to harass workers who have fallen on hard times, even when they are doing nothing wrong. In a 2016 incident captured on video, two Howell policemen accused a homeless man of illegally panhandling.

The man had been standing in the grass on the side of a road near an intersection. He was displaying a sign saying that he was looking for work. The man politely explained to the policemen that, after a previous encounter with a police sergeant, he had checked with the Ocean County prosecutor’s office, which told him that he would be violating the local anti-panhandling ordinance only if he were asking for money or walking up to cars on the road. The policemen falsely accused the man of impeding traffic. They ticketed him and ordered him to leave. When the man asked under what law he was being asked to leave, the officers did not respond.

The firing of a young worker by Five Guys sends the unmistakable message to the remaining employees that not even a hint of disrespect for the police will be tolerated. The restaurant’s public statement, the lunch with Kudrick, the employee “training,” and the fundraiser likewise impress on the remaining employees’ minds that the police wield exceptional power and are to be treated with ultimate deference.

The entire incident sheds light on the sharpening class tensions in New Jersey and throughout the United

States.



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