

Synopsis/Syllabi

SECOND DIVISION

[G.R. No. 129418. September 10, 1999]

RODRIGO G. HABANA, *petitioner* vs. NATIONAL LABOR RELATIONS COMMISSION, OMANFIL INTERNATIONAL MANPOWER DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION, and HYUNDAI ENGINEERING COMPANY, LIMITED, *respondents*.

DECISION

BELLOSILLO, J.:

Petitioner Rodrigo G. Habana was hired in January 1995 by private respondent Omanfil International Manpower Development Corporation (OMANFIL) to work for its foreign principal, respondent Hyundai Engineering Company, Ltd. (HYUNDAI), in Sabia, Kuwait. His employment contract was good for two (2) years commencing upon his arrival at his work station on 29 January 1995. However on 6 February 1996, after only one (1) year, HYUNDAI issued a Resignation Notice terminating Habanas employment. Habana was forced to return to the Philippines and, together with one Adjuthor P. De Guzman, another dismissed employee, filed a complaint for illegal dismissal against OMANFIL and HYUNDAI.

Summons dated 28 March 1996 was served on private respondents requiring them to file their answer within ten (10) days from receipt thereof. On 10 April 1996, two (2) days beyond the period set in the summons, OMANFIL and HYUNDAI filed a Motion for Bill of Particulars instead of an answer. It alleged that the NLRC *pro-forma* complaint sheet filled up by Habana and De Guzman lacked the required narration of facts constituting the causes of action and other relevant information as to enable private respondents to prepare an intelligent and responsive pleading to the charges and/or money claims of Habana and De Guzman.^{i[1]}

For their part, Habana and De Guzman moved to declare private respondents in default for failure to submit their answer as ordered. Private respondents opposed the motion and reiterated that Habana and De Guzman should file their bill of particulars. The latter however insisted that the Labor Arbiter should first resolve their motion before the case could proceed. Later, the parties agreed to submit their respective motions for the consideration of the Labor Arbiter.^{ii[2]}

On 11 June 1996, without waiting for the resolution of the pending motions, complainants filed their bill of particulars which they adopted at the same time as their position paper. OMANFIL and HYUNDAI were furnished a copy thereof by registered mail on the same day. Then on 5 July 1996, the Labor Arbiter rendered a decision in favor of Habana and De Guzman holding that -

x x x x to the date of this decision, respondents have not submitted their answer/position paper. Thus, on motion of complainants, we proceeded to resolve the present case on the basis of

complainants position paper and other supporting documents they submitted to support their claims x x x x

On appeal, the NLRC in its Resolution of 15 January 1997ⁱⁱⁱ[3] vacated and set aside the judgment of the Labor Arbiter and remanded the case to the court of origin for further proceedings. The NLRC held that OMANFIL and HYUNDAI were denied due process, thus -

x x x x while the Labor Arbiter is given the discretion to determine if a hearing is necessary, the discretion must be exercised prudently. Where it appears that such power would result in grave injustice to any or both, by depriving him or them of the fundamental right to due process, we, in the exercise of the power of review, shall act to correct the error. In the case at bar, it is crystal clear that there remain several factual issues that still need to be ventilated, threshed, heard, tried and resolved which are within the competence, original and exclusive jurisdiction of the Labor Arbiter. Certainly, further hearings and appropriate proceedings, which would allow the parties to present witnesses and other documentary evidences, in their respective behalf, or at least for the respondents-appellants to submit their position paper, would also allow the Labor Arbiter to fulfill his duty to ascertain the truth as to the factual issues involved x x x x

In this petition for *certiorari* Habana^{iv}[4] imputes grave abuse of discretion to the NLRC in reversing the Labor Arbiter, arguing that: (a) determination of the necessity of hearing is discretionary on the Labor Arbiter; (b) the subsequent filing by petitioner of his bill of particulars had the effect of abandoning his motion to declare OMANFIL and HYUNDAI in default; and (c) OMANFIL and HYUNDAI received petitioners Bill of Particulars, hence, they cannot invoke denial of due process.

The sole issue to be resolved is whether private respondents OMANFIL and HYUNDAI were denied due process when the Labor Arbiter decided the case solely on the basis of the position paper and supporting documents submitted in evidence by Habana and De Guzman.

We rule in the affirmative. The manner in which this case was decided by the Labor Arbiter left much to be desired in terms of respect for the right of private respondents to due process -

First, there was only one conciliatory conference held in this case. This was on 10 May 1996. During the conference, the parties did not discuss at all the possibility of amicable settlement due to petitioners stubborn insistence that private respondents be declared in default.

Second, the parties agreed to submit their respective motions - petitioners motion to declare respondents in default and private respondents motion for bill of particulars - for the consideration of the Labor Arbiter. The Labor Arbitration Associate, one Ms. Gloria Vivar, then informed the parties that they would be notified of the action of the Labor Arbiter on the pending motions. The Minutes of the conference show -

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Respondents submitted a manifestation with motion for the complainants to submit a bill of particulars, copy furnished complainants.

Complainants moved that their motion to declare respondents in default be resolved first by the Labor Arbiter.

Both motions submitted for consideration of the Labor Arbiter.

(Signature of Mr. Habana) 5/10/96

(Signature of Mr. De Guzman)

(Signature of Ms. Borrego)

MA. SHIRLEI M. BORREGO

Representative, OMANFIL (*underscoring supplied*).v[5]

Third, since the conference on 10 May 1996 no order or notice as to what action was taken by the Labor Arbiter in disposing the pending motions was ever received by private respondents. They were not declared in default by the Labor Arbiter nor was petitioner required to submit a bill of particulars.

Fourth, neither was there any order or notice requiring private respondents to file their position paper, nor an order informing the parties that the case was already submitted for decision. What private respondents received was the assailed decision adverse to them.

It is clear from the foregoing that there was an utter absence of opportunity to be heard at the arbitration level, as the procedure adopted by the Labor Arbiter virtually prevented private respondents from explaining matters fully and presenting their side of the controversy. They had no chance whatsoever to at least acquaint the Labor Arbiter with whatever defenses they might have to the charge that they illegally dismissed petitioner. In fact, private respondents presented their position paper and documentary evidence only for the first time on appeal to the NLRC.

The essence of due process is that a party be afforded a reasonable opportunity to be heard and to submit any evidence he may have in support of his defense.vi[6] Where, as in this case, sufficient opportunity to be heard either through oral arguments or position paper and other pleadings is not accorded a party to a case, there is undoubtedly a denial of due process.

It is true that Labor Arbiters are not bound by strict rules of evidence and of procedure.vii[7] The manner by which Arbiters dispose of cases before them is concededly a matter of discretion. However, that discretion must be exercised regularly, legally and within the confines of due process. They are mandated to use every reasonable means to ascertain the facts of each case, speedily, objectively and without regard to technicalities of law or procedure, all in the interest of justice and for the purpose of accuracy and correctness in adjudicating the monetary awards.

In the instant case, what should have been done by the Labor Arbiter was to rule on the pending motions, or at least notify private respondents that he would no longer resolve their motions, and to direct them forthwith to submit within a reasonable time their position paper as well as all the evidence they might want to introduce before the case would be resolved. These are essential not only in the interest of orderly procedure but, more importantly, as part of due process. But as has been said, not a single order or notice was received by private respondents from the Labor Arbiter, other than the assailed decision.

Official action must be responsive to the supremacy of reason and the dictates of justice. What due process contemplates is freedom from arbitrariness, the substance rather than the form being paramount.^{viii[8]} Surely, employers are equally entitled as the employees to due process.

It may be true that petitioner eventually submitted his bill of particulars, and thus impliedly abandoned his motion to declare private respondents in default. But failure of private respondents to file their answer or comment within a reasonable time from receipt of the bill of particulars could not fairly be taken against them. There were pending motions which the parties mutually and expressly agreed to submit for resolution by the Labor Arbiter, and both of them were advised by Labor Arbitration Associate Gloria Vivar to await further orders and notices from the Labor Arbiter in connection therewith. Under these circumstances, private respondents were just following instructions and should not be faulted for their inaction regarding the case.

To subscribe to petitioners argument - i.e., the bill of particulars rendered moot and academic petitioners motion and the resolution thereof x x x x [and] should have alerted respondents into taking appropriate steps on the pending case^{ix[9]} - would be to put him in control of the proceedings. Petitioner as a mere litigant should not be allowed to dictate the tempo of the proceedings. He could not obstinately insist on a prior resolution of his motion to declare private respondents in default, only to abandon it impliedly later with the expectation that the other party would take such implicit abandonment as having the effect of automatically divesting the Labor Arbiter of the authority to act on the submitted motions.

While the speedy disposition of labor cases may be the policy of the law, it must be emphasized that speed alone is not the chief objective of a trial. It is the careful and deliberate consideration for the administration of justice, a genuine respect for the rights of all parties and the requirements of procedural due process, and an adherence to this Courts standing admonition that the disposition of cases should always be predicated on the consideration that more than the mere convenience of the courts and of the parties in the case, the ends of justice and fairness would be served thereby. These are more important than a race to end the trial.^{x[10]} As eloquently expressed by the US Supreme Court in one case,^{xi[11]} which, although not legally controlling in this jurisdiction, nevertheless has persuasive effect -

The establishment of prompt efficacious procedures to achieve legitimate state ends is a proper state interest worthy of cognizance in constitutional adjudication. But the Constitution recognizes higher values than speed and efficiency. Indeed, one may fairly say of the Bill of Rights in general, and the Due Process Clause in particular, that they were designed to protect the fragile values of a vulnerable citizenry from the overbearing concern for efficiency and efficacy that may characterize x x x government officials x x x

Finally, complaints of this character on the part of management could have been avoided had the labor official concerned been more sensitive to the need to observe procedural regularity. Had he thus been, as he should be, the beneficiary is not only the employer who, as he ought to, should be allowed the fullest opportunity to resist unwarranted claims, but also the employee or laborer involved as there would be no undue delay in the event the verdict would favor him.

WHEREFORE, the petition for *certiorari* is DISMISSED. The 15 January 1997 Resolution of the National Labor Relations Commission vacating and setting aside the decision of the Labor Arbiter, and ordering the remand of the case to the Labor Arbitration Branch of origin for further hearings on the factual issues involved, to be resolved with dispatch consistent with due process, is AFFIRMED. No costs.

SO ORDERED.

Mendoza, Quisumbing, and Buena, JJ., concur.

i[1] Records, p. 4.

ii[2] Labor Arbiter Eduardo J. Carpio.

iii[3] Penned by Presiding Commissioner Raul T. Aquino, concurred in by Commissioners Victoriano R. Calaycay and Rogelio I. Rayala.

iv[4] Complainant Adjuthor P. de Guzman did not join Habana in this petition for *certiorari*.

v[5] Minutes of 10 May 1996 Conference; *Rollo*, p. 71; Annex 1.

vi[6] *Shoemart, Inc. v. National Labor Relations Commission*, G.R. Nos. 90795-96, 13 August 1993, 225 SCRA 311.

vii[7] See *Gelmart Industries Phils., Inc. v. Leogardo, Jr.*, G.R. No. 70544, 5 November 1987, 155 SCRA 403.

viii[8] See *Magsalang v. Ople*, No. L-38813, 29 April 1975, 63 SCRA 508.

ix[9] *Rollo*, pp. 8-9.

x[10] See *De Guzman v. Elbinias*, G.R. No. 57395, 17 April 1989, 172 SCRA 240.

xi[11] *Stanley v. Illinois*, 405 U.S. 645, 656