

**RENERIO SAMBAJON, RONALD SAMBAJON, CRISANTO CONOS, AND
FREDILYN BACULBAS, COMPLAINANTS, ATTY. JOSE A. SUING,
RESPONDENT.**

A.C. NO. 7062 (Formerly CBD Case No. 04-1355). September 26, 2006

Ponente: CARPIO MORALES, J.

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CARPIO MORALES, J.:

Complainants, via a complaint[1] filed before the Integrated Bar of the Philippines (IBP), have sought the disbarment of Atty. Jose A. Suing (respondent) on the grounds of deceit, malpractice, violation of Lawyer's Oath and the Code of Professional Responsibility.[2]

Herein complainants were among the complainants in NLRC Case No. 00-0403180-98, "Microplast, Inc. Workers Union, Represented by its Union President Zoilo Ardan, et al. v. Microplast, Incorporated and/or Johnny Rodil and Manuel Rodil," for Unfair Labor Practice (ULP) and Illegal Dismissal, while respondent was the counsel for the therein respondents. Said case was consolidated with NLRC Case No. 00-04-03161-98, "Microplast Incorporated v. Vilma Ardan, et al.," for Illegal Strike.

By Decision of August 29, 2001,[3] Labor Arbiter Ariel Cadiente Santos dismissed the Illegal Strike case, and declared the employer-clients of respondent guilty of ULP. Thus, the Labor Arbiter disposed:

WHEREFORE, premises considered, the complaint for illegal strike is dismissed for lack of merit.

Respondents Microplast, Inc., Johnny Rodil and Manuel Rodil are hereby declared guilty of Unfair Labor Practice for union busting and that the dismissal of the nine (9) complainants are declared illegal. All the respondents in NLRC Case No. 00-04-03161-98 for illegal dismissal are directed to reinstate all the complainants to their former position with full backwages from date of dismissal until actual reinstatement computed as follows:

X X X X

3. CRISANTO CONOS

Backwages:

Basic Wage:

2/21/98 - 10/30/99 = 20.30 mos.

P198.00 x 26 days x 20.30 =

P104, 504.40

10/31/99 -10/31/00 = 12 mos.

P223.50 x 26 days x 12 =

69, 732.00

11/01/00 - 8/30/01 = 10 mos.

P250.00 x 26 days x 10 =

65,000.00

P239,236.40

13th Month Pay:

1/12 of P239,236.40 =

19,936.36

SILP

2/16/98 - 12/31/98 = 10.33 mos.

P198.00 x 5 days x 10.33/ 12 = 852.22

1/1/99 - 12/31/99 = 12mos.

P223.50 x 5 days x 12/12 = 1,117.50

1/1/00 - 10/30/01 = 20 mos.

P250.00 x 5 days x 20/12 = 2,083.33

4,053.05

P263,225.81

x x x x

7. RONALD SAMBAJON (same as Conos)

263,225.81

8.FREDELYN BACULBAS (same as Conos)

263,225.81

9. RENEIRO SAMBAJON (same as Conos)

263,225.81

Total Backwages

P2,370,674.38

Respondents are jointly and severally liable to pay the above-mentioned backwages including the various monetary claims stated in the Manifestation dated August 24, 1998 except payment of overtime pay and to pay 10% attorney's fees of all sums owing to complainants.[4] (Emphasis and underscoring supplied)

The Decision having become final and executory, the Labor Arbiter issued on September 2, 2003 a Writ of Execution.[5]

In the meantime, on the basis of individual Release Waiver and Quitclaims dated February 27, 2004 purportedly signed and sworn to by seven of the complainants in the ULP and Illegal Dismissal case before Labor Arbiter

Santos in the presence of respondent, the Labor Arbiter dismissed said case insofar as the seven complainants were concerned, by Order dated March 9, 2004. [6]

Herein complainants, four of the seven who purportedly executed the Release Waiver and Quitclaims, denied having signed and sworn to before the Labor Arbiter the said documents or having received the considerations therefor. Hence, spawned the administrative complaint at bar, alleging that respondent, acting in collusion with his clients Johnny and Manuel Rodil, "frustrated" the implementation of the Writ of Execution by presenting before the Labor Arbiter the spurious documents.

In a related move, complainants also filed a criminal complaint for Falsification against respondent, together with his clients Johnny and Manuel Rodil, before the Prosecutor's Office of Quezon City where it was docketed as I.S. No. 04-5203.[7]

In his Report and Recommendation[8] dated September 27, 2005, IBP Commissioner Salvador B. Hababag, who conducted an investigation of the administrative complaint at bar, recommended that respondent be faulted for negligence and that he be reprimanded therefor with warning, in light of his following discussion:

The issue to be resolved is whether or not respondent can be disbarred for his alleged manipulation of four alleged RELEASE WAIVER AND QUITCLAIM by herein complainants who subsequently disclaimed the same as bogus and falsified.

A lawyer takes an oath when he is admitted to the Bar. By doing so he thereby becomes an Officer of the Court on whose shoulders rests the grave responsibility of assisting the courts in the proper, fair, speedy and efficient administration of justice.

Mindful of the fact that the present proceedings involve, on the one hand, the right of a litigant to seek redress against a member of the Bar who has, allegedly caused him damaged, either through malice or negligence, while in the performance of his duties as his counsel, and, on the other, the right of that member of the Bar to protect and preserve his good name and reputation, we have again gone over and considered [the] aspects of the case.

All the cases protesting and contesting the genuineness, veracity and due execution of the questioned RELEASE WAIVER AND QUITCLAIM namely: Urgent Ex-Parte Motion to Recall, Appeal and Falsification are PENDING resolution in their respective venues. Arbiter Ariel Cadiente Santos, who was supposed to know the identities of the herein complainants is not impleaded by the complainants when it was his solemn duty and obligation to ascertain true and real identities of person executing Release Waiver with Quitclaim.

The old adage that in the performance of an official duty there is that presumption of regularity unless proven otherwise, such was proven in the January 28, 2005 clarificatory questioning . . . :

x x x x

. . . In the case at bar, the question of whether or not respondent actually committed the despicable act would seem to be fairly debatable under the circumstances.[9] (Emphasis and underscoring supplied)

The Board of Governors of the IBP, by Resolution No. XVII-2005-226, approved and adopted the Report and Recommendation of Commissioner Hababag.

After the records of the case were forwarded to the Office of the Bar Confidant (OBC), the Director for Bar Discipline of the IBP[10] transmitted additional records including a Motion to Amend the Resolution No. XVII-2005-226[11] filed by respondent.

One of the complainants, Renerio Sambajon (Sambajon), by Petition[12] filed before the OBC, assailed the IBP

Board Resolution. The Petition was filed three days after the 15-day period to assail the IBP Resolution. Sambajon explains that while his counsel received the Resolution on February 27, 2006, he only learned of it when he visited on March 16, 2006 his counsel who could not reach him, he (Sambajon) having transferred from one residence to another.

Giving Sambajon the benefit of the doubt behind the reason for the 3-day delay in filing the present petition, in the interest of justice, this Court gives his petition due course.

In respondent's Motion to Amend the IBP Board Resolution, he does not deny that those whom he met face to face before Commissioner Hababag were not the same persons whom he saw before Labor Arbiter Santos on February 27, 2004. [13] He hastens to add though that he was not familiar with the complainants as they were not attending the hearings before Arbiter Santos.[14] Complainants[15] and their former counsel Atty. Rodolfo Capocyan[16] claim otherwise, however. And the Minutes[17] of the proceedings before the National Conciliation Mediation Board in a related case, NCMB-NCR-NS-02-081-98, "Re: Microplast, Inc., Labor Dispute," which minutes bear respondent's and complainants' signatures, belie respondent's claim that he had not met complainants before.

Respondent, who declared that he went to the Office of the Labor Arbiter on February 27, 2004 on the request of his clients who "told him that on February 27, 2004 the seven claimants w[ould] be at the office of Arbiter Santos [to] submit their respective quitclaims and waivers," heaps on the Labor Arbiter the responsibility of ascertaining the identity of the parties who executed the Release Waiver and Quitclaims. But respondent himself had the same responsibility. He was under obligation to protect his clients' interest, especially given the amount allegedly given by them in consideration of the execution of the documents. His answers to the clarificatory questions of Commissioner Hababag do not, however, show that he discharged such obligation.

COMM. HABABAG:

But is it not a fact [that it is] also your duty to ask.. that the money of your client would go to the deserving employee?

ATTY. SUING:

I did not do that anymore, Your Honor, because there was already as you call it before a precedent in February of 1998 when my client directly made settlement to the nine or eight of the seventeen original complainants, Your Honor, and I did not participate. Hindi po ako nakialam don sa kanilang usapan because it is my belief that the best way, Your Honor, to have a dispute settled between the parties is that we let them do the discussion, we'll let them do the settlement because sometimes you know, Your Honor, sad to say, when lawyers are involved in a matters [sic] of settlement the dispute does not terminate as in this case, Your Honor.

X X X X

COMM. HABABAG:

Yes. What made you appear on said date and time before Arbiter Santos?

ATTY. SUING:

I was called by my client to go to the office of Arbiter Santos, number one, to witness the signing of the documents of Quitclaim and Waiver; number 2, so that according to them someone as a lawyer will represent them in that proceedings.

COMM. HABABAG:

My query, did it not surprise you that no money was given to you and yet there would be a signing of

Quitclaim Receipt and Release?

ATTY. SUING:

I am not, your Honor, because it happened before and there were no complaints, Your Honor.

COMM. HABABAG:

Just because it happened before you did not bother to see to it that there is a voucher so you just rely on your precedent, is that what you mean?

ATTY. SUING:

Yes, Your Honor, because I always believe that the parties who are talking and it is my client who knows them better than I do, Your Honor.

COMM. HABABAG:

So, you just followed the instruction of your client to be present at Arbiter Cadiente Santos office because there would be signing of Quitclaim Receipt and Release, is that clear?

ATTY. SUING:

Yes, Your Honor.

COMM. HABABAG:

[You] [d]id not bother to ask your client where is the money intended for the payment of these workers?

ATTY. SUING:

I did not ask.

COMM. HABABAG:

You did not asked [sic] your client who will prepare the documents?

ATTY. SUING:

As far as the documents are concerned, Your Honor.

COMM. HABABAG:

The Quitclaim Receipt and Release?

ATTY. SUING:

Yes, Your Honor, I remember this. They asked me before February of 1998.

COMM. HABABAG:

When you say they whom are you referring to?

ATTY. SUING:

I'm referring to my client, Your Honor.

COMM. HABABAG:

They asked me attorney can you please prepare us a document of Quitclaim and Waiver or give us a simple [sic] of Quitclaim and Waiver. I do recall that I made one but this document, Your Honor, is only a single

document where all the signatories named are present because my purpose there really, Your Honor, is that so that each of them will be there together and they will identify themselves, see each other para ho siguradong sila-sila yong magkakasama at magkakakilanlan. x x x x And when the signing took place in February of 2004 it was made for any [sic] individual, Your Honor, no longer the document that I prepared when all of the seven will be signing in one document.

COMM. HABABAG:

Okay. You did not inquire from your client whom [sic] made the changes?

ATTY. SUING:

I did not anymore because, Your Honor, at the time when I was there, there are already people there, the seven complainants plus another woman.[18] (Emphasis and underscoring supplied)

The Code of Professional Responsibility provides:

CANON 17 - A LAWYER OWES FIDELITY TO THE CAUSE OF HIS CLIENT AND HE SHALL BE MINDFUL OF THE TRUST AND CONFIDENCE REPOSED IN HIM.

CANON 18 - A LAWYER SHALL SERVE HIS CLIENT WITH COMPETENCE AND DILIGENCE.

x x x x

Rule 18.03 - A lawyer shall not neglect a legal matter entrusted to him, and his negligence in connection therewith shall render him liable.

To be sure, respondent's client Manuel Rodil did not request him to go to the Office of Labor Arbiter Cadiente to be a mere passive witness to the signing of the Release Waiver and Quitclaims. That he was requested to go there could only mean that he would exert vigilance to protect his clients' interest. This he conceded when he acknowledged the purpose of his presence at the Office of Labor Arbiter Santos, thus:

ATTY. SUING:

To go there, Your Honor, and represent them and see that these document[s] are properly signed and that these people are properly identified and verified them in front of Arbiter Ariel Cadiente Santos.[19](Emphasis and underscoring supplied)

That there was an alleged precedent in 1998 when a group of complainants entered into a compromise agreement with his clients in which he "did not participate" and from which no problem arose did not excuse him from carrying out the admitted purpose of going to the Labor Arbiter's office - "that [the complainants] are properly identified . . . in front of [the] Arbiter."

Besides, by respondent's own information, Labor Arbiter Santos was entertaining doubts on the true identity of those who executed the Release Waiver and Quitclaims.[20] That should have alerted him to especially exercise the diligence of a lawyer to protect his clients' interest. But he was not and he did not.

Diligence is "the attention and care required of a person in a given situation and is the opposite of negligence." A lawyer serves his client with diligence by adopting that norm of practice expected of men of good intentions. He thus owes entire devotion to the interest of his client, warm zeal in the defense and maintenance of his rights, and the exertion of his utmost learning, skill, and ability to ensure that nothing shall be taken or withheld from him, save by the rules of law legally applied. It is axiomatic in the practice of law that the price of success is eternal diligence to the cause of the client.

The practice of law does not require extraordinary diligence (exactissima diligentia) or that "extreme measure

of care and caution which persons of unusual prudence and circumspection use for securing and preserving their rights. All that is required is ordinary diligence (*diligentia*) or that degree of vigilance expected of a bonus pater familias. x x x[21] (*Italics in the original; underscoring supplied*)

And this Court notes the attempt of respondent to influence the answers of his client Manuel Rodil when the latter testified before Commissioner Manuel Hababag:

COMM. HABABAG:

May pinirmahan dito na Quitclaim Receipt and Release. Ito ho ba sinong may gawa nitong Receipt Waiver and Quitclaim?

MR. RODIL:

Sila po.

COMM. HABABAG:

Ibig mong sabihin ibinigay sa yo to ng complainant o sinong nag-abot sa iyo nitong Receipt Waiver and Quitclaim?

MR. RODIL:

Si Atty. Suing po.

ATTY. SUING:

In fact, ang tanong sa iyo kung ibinigay daw sa iyo yong mga dokumentong ito or what?

COMM. HABABAG:

Okay, uulitin ko ha, tagalog na ang tanong ko sa iyo ha hindi na English. Ito bang Release Waiver and Quitclaim sino ang may gawa nito, sino ang nagmakinilya nito?

MR. RODIL:

Kami yata ang gumawa niyan.

COMM. HABABAG:

Pag sinabi mong kami yata ang may gawa sino sa inyong mga officer, tauhan o abogado ang gumawa nito?

MR. RODIL:

Matagal na ho yan eh.

x x x x

COMM. HABABAG:

Okay. Pangalawang gusto kong itanong. Sino ang naghatid nito kay Ariel Cadiente Santos para pirmahan ni Ariel Cadiente Santos?

MR. RODIL:

Si attorney po.

ATTY. SUING:

Wait. I did not bring the documents. The Commissioner is asking kung sino ang nagdala ng mga dokumento?

MR. RODIL:

Yong mga tao.

X X X X

COMM. HABABAG:

Simple ang tanong ko ha. Intindihin mo muna. Kanino mo inabot ang bayad sa nakalagay dito sa Release waiver and Quitclaim?

MR. RODIL:

Kay attorney po.

COMM. HABABAG:

Pag sinabi mong kay attorney sinong tinutukoy mong attorney?

ATTY. SUING:

Yong ibinigay na pera pambayad saan, yon ang tanong.

COMM. HABABAG:

Sundan mo ang tanong ko ha. Ako ang nagtatanong hindi ang abogado mo.

MR. RODIL:

Opo.

COMM. HABABAG:

Huwag kang tatawa. I'm reminding you serious tayo dito.

MR. RODIL:

Opo serious po.

COMM. HABABAG:

Sabi mo may inabutan kang taong pera?

MR. RODIL:

Opo.

COMM. HABABAG:

Ang sagot mo kay attorney. Sinong attorney ang tinutukoy mo?

MR. RODIL:

Atty. Suing po.

COMM. HABABAG:

Okay.

ATTY. SUING:

Your Honor,...

COMM. HABABAG:

Pabayaan mo muna. I'll come to that. Magkano kung iyong natatandaan ang perang inabot kay Atty. Suing?

MR. RODIL:

Yan ang hindi ko matandaan.

x x x x[22] (Emphasis and underscoring supplied)

Thus, not only did respondent try to coach his client or influence him to answer questions in an apparent attempt not to incriminate him (respondent). His client contradicted respondent's claim that the Release Waiver and Quitclaim which he (respondent) prepared was not the one presented at the Arbiter's Office, as well as his implied claim that he was not involved in releasing to the complainants the money for and in consideration of the execution of the documents.

As an officer of the court, a lawyer is called upon to assist in the administration of justice. He is an instrument to advance its cause. Any act on his part that tends to obstruct, perverts or impedes the administration of justice constitutes misconduct.[23] While the Commission on Bar Discipline is not a court, the proceedings therein are nonetheless part of a judicial proceeding, a disciplinary action being in reality an investigation by the Court into the misconduct of its officers or an examination into his character.[24]

In *Bantolo v. Castillon, Jr.*[25] the respondent lawyer was found guilty of gross misconduct for his attempts to delay and obstruct the investigation being conducted by the IBP. Nonetheless, this Court found that a suspension of one month from the practice of law was enough to give him "the opportunity to retrace his steps back to the virtuous path of the legal profession."

While the disbarment of respondent is, under the facts and circumstances attendant to the case, not reasonable, neither is reprimand as recommended by the IBP. This Court finds that respondent's suspension from the practice of law for six months is in order.

WHEREFORE, respondent, Atty. Jose A. Suing, is found GUILTY of negligence and gross misconduct and is SUSPENDED from the practice of law for a period of Six (6) Months, with WARNING that a repetition of the same or similar acts will be dealt with more severely.

Let a copy of this Decision be furnished the Office of the Bar Confidant, the Integrated Bar of the Philippines, and all courts throughout the country.

SO ORDERED.

Quisumbing, (Chairperson), Carpio, Tinga, and Velasco, Jr., JJ., concur.

[1] Rollo, pp. 1-7.

[2] CANON I - A LAWYER SHALL UPHOLD THE CONSTITUTION, OBEY THE LAWS OF THE LAND AND PROMOTE RESPECT FOR LAW AND LEGAL PROCESSES.

Rule 1.01 - A lawyer shall not engage in unlawful, dishonest, immoral or deceitful conduct.

Rule 1.02 - A lawyer shall not counsel or abet activities aimed at defiance of the law or at lessening confidence in the legal system.

Rule 1.03 - A lawyer shall not, for any corrupt motive or interest, encourage any suit or proceeding or delay any man's cause.

Rule 1.04 - A lawyer shall encourage his clients to avoid, end or settle a controversy if it will admit of a fair settlement.

CANON 10. - A LAWYER OWES CANDOR, FAIRNESS AND GOOD FAITH TO THE COURT.

Rule 10.01 - A lawyer shall not do any falsehood, nor consent to the doing of any in court; nor shall he mislead, or allow the Court to be misled by any artifice.

CANON 12. - A LAWYER SHALL EXERT EVERY EFFORT AND CONSIDER IT HIS DUTY TO ASSIST IN THE SPEEDY AND EFFICIENT ADMINISTRATION OF JUSTICE.

Rule 12.06 - A lawyer shall not knowingly assist a witness to misrepresent himself or to impersonate another.

[3] Rollo, pp. 8-20.

[4] Rollo, pp. 17, 19-20.

[5] Id. at 21-23.

[6] Rollo, p. 102. The Order reads:

Finding the Motion To Dismiss filed by respondents to be sufficient in form and substance, the same is hereby granted.

WHEREFORE, in view of the above, let this case be, as it is hereby considered DISMISSED insofar [sic] as the seven complainants namely Crisanto Conos, Alex Patola, Dionisio Patola, Noel Saletaria, Ron[al]d Sambajon, Fredelyn Baculbas and Reinerio [sic] Sambajon are concerned.

[7] Rollo, p. 5.

[8] Id. at 323-329.

[9] Id. at 326-328.

[10] Id. at 330.

[11] Id. at 331-336.

[12] Id. at 343-366.

[13] TSN, January 21, 2005, rollo, pp.225-228.

COMM. HABABAG:

You said you were present when they signed this Release Waiver and Quitclaim before Cadiente Santos, is that correct?

ATTY. SUING:

Yes, Your Honor.

COMM. HABABAG:

As an officer of the court I ask you [a] point.

ATTY. SUING:

Yes.

COMM. HABABAG:

Did you personally see these Ronald Sambajon, Fredilyn Baculbas, Crisanto Conos and [Reinerio] Sambajon, signed freely th[ese] Release Waiver and Quitclaim[s] on February 27, 2004 before Arbiter Ariel Cadiente Santos?

ATTY. SUING:

Yes, Your Honor, I saw persons.

COMM. HABABAG:

No, specific ako. Sila ba talaga ang nakita mong humarap, itong apat na nabanggit ko na pangalan, sila ba talaga?

ATTY. SUING:

I did not know these people, Your Honor.

COMM. HABABAG:

Hindi. Ibig sabihin sabi mo andoon ka nong magpirma nito?

ATTY. SUING:

Yes, Your Honor.

COMM. HABABAG:

Katunayan narinig mo pina[n]umpa sila ni Arbiter Ariel Cadiente Santos?

ATTY. SUING:

Ang tanong ko ngayon at this point in time sila ba talaga yong nakita mo itong apat (4) na ito mga complainants na ito noong 2004 last February 27. Sila ba talaga yong humarap doon o yong ibang tao?

ATTY. SUING:

I did not see these people, Your Honor, because in the first place I do not know them. As I said it is not true, Your Honor...

COMM. HABABAG:

Hindi, wag na tayong lumayo. Ang tanong ko lang naman ay itong apat (4). Samakatuwid maliwanag tayo dito?

ATTY. SUING:

Yes, Your Honor.

COMM. HABABAG:

When in time na itong apat (4) na complainants na ito ay hindi ito ang humarap doon kay Arbiter Ariel Cadiente Santos?

ATTY. SUING:

Yes, Your Honor, I will also say that for the first time I saw these people here. I never saw them before Arbiter Santos before even when the case was filed, Your Honor. And contrary to what they are saying these people that they appeared there they did not appear, Your Honor, it was only this fellow who appeared together with his wife.

Vide TSN, January 31, 2005, rollo, pp. 270-280.

[14] Vide Respondent's Counter-Affidavit filed before the Office of the City Prosecutor, rollo, pp. 34-35, and his Answer filed before the Commission on Bar Discipline, rollo, pp. 47-52.

[15] Vide TSN, January 21, 2005, TSN, rollo, pp. 192-193.

[16] Vide TSN, January 31, 2005, rollo, pp. 306-307. Atty. Rodolfo Capocyan (also spelled Capocquian in some parts of the records) was the counsel of the complainants in the consolidated labor cases and a former partner of complainant's present counsel, Atty. Mory Nueva.

[17] Vide Minutes of the NCMB in NS-02-081-98 on March 2, 9, 19, and 20, 1998, rollo, pp. 39-42.

[18] TSN, January 28, 2005, rollo, pp. 259-270.

[19] Id. at 212.

[20] TSN, January 28, 2005, rollo, p. 254.

[21] Edquibal v. Ferrer, Jr., A.C. No. 5687, February 3, 2005, 450 SCRA 406, 412.

[22] TSN, January 21, 2005, rollo, pp. 195-204.

[23] Agpalo, Comments On The Code Of Professional Responsibility And The Code Of Judicial Conduct (2004), 408.

[24] Agpalo, Legal Ethics (1997 Ed), 416.

[25] A.C. No. 6589, December 19, 2005, 478 SCRA 443.

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