

LILIAN S. SIO, PETITIONER, VS. NATIONAL LABOR RELATIONS COMMISSION, THE HERITAGE HOTEL, AND/OR EDDIE YEO, GRAZIE MAGSALIN, GLADYS BIALA, AND CORAZON SUDARIO, RESPONDENTS.

Ponente: VILLON, J.

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VILLON, J.:

This is a petition for certiorari under Rule 65 of the 1997 Rules of Civil Procedure, as amended, assailing, on grounds of grave abuse of discretion amounting to lack or excess of jurisdiction, the decision[1] dated July 31, 2012 and resolution[2] dated September 18, 2012 issued by public respondent National Labor Relations Commission (NLRC), Sixth Division, in NLRC LAC No. 06-001823-12. The assailed issuances affirmed the April 24, 2012 decision[3] of Labor Arbiter (LA) Daniel J. Cajilig in NLRC-NCR Case No. 10-15183-11 dismissing the complaint for unfair labor practice and illegal suspension filed by herein petitioner Lilian S. Sio against private respondents.

The factual and procedural antecedents of the case are as follows:

On September 1, 1995, petitioner was employed by private respondent, The Heritage Hotel (or "Heritage"), as Service Agent at its coffee shops and restaurants. She usually worked from 2:00 o'clock in the afternoon to 10:00 o'clock in the evening. Her tasks included helping and assisting in serving food and beverages to the hotel's guests. Petitioner claimed that she was an active member and a leader of Heritage's local employees' union, Piglas Heritage.

At around 11:00 o'clock in the evening of April 29, 2011, an incident occurred while petitioner was on duty. One of the hotel's guests, Erlinda Tiozon (or "Tiozon") ordered food and beverage using Heritage's Player Tracking System (PTS). The parties dispute what happened next. Petitioner's version of the incident is as follows:

"Last 29 April 2011, at around 11pm, a certain guest ordered to (sic) the herein complainant[4] at HBC [Heritage Boutique and Casino] Slot Machine under the name of Ms. Erlinda Tiozon. After taking her orders, she was asked to present her PTS card. PTS means player tracking system, where clients earn points while playing at the casino and corresponding points can earn them for (sic) free food and beverage. But food and beverage ordered should correspond to the earn (sic) points in the PTS when swiped.

Said guest replied that the PTS is not with her. The order cannot be processed in the absence of the PTS, hence as a matter of SOP, herein complainant looked for the immediate superior on duty and further asked a slot machine attendant the whereabouts of the slot machine supervisor on duty at the HBC. Finding none, complainant proceeded to basement slot machine to look for an officer that will approve such transactions.

Luckily, complainant found Mr. Jeffrey Bumatay, the slot machine head and asked for his approval. He DID NOT ACT ON SUCH REQUEST as he told herein complainant that there was a previous order to Mr. Jessie Barroga, Service Agent of Le Café about 30 minutes ago from the same person complainant seeks for approval. Later, he found out that the order he confirmed and signed for approval was from Mr. Mark Tiozon,

the husband of the lady [Erlinda Tiozon] who ordered without PTS. Later on, Mr. Bumatay, questioned Mr. Barroga about the incident.

Mr. Bumatay's clear instruction was to get another PTS card to (sic) Ms. Erlinda Tiozon's companion, as he told herein complainant that the order of Mrs. Erlinda Tiozon was disapproved, since only once can the guest order using the PTS, if there will be another order, it cannot be allowed.

After Mr. Bumatay's instruction, complainant went back to HBC slot machine and explained everything to Mrs. Tiozon that her orders was (sic) disapproved by Mr. Bumatay and asked her for another PTS from her companion.

At that point, Mrs. Tiozon got mad, and asked who disapproved her orders. Complainant reiterated Mr. Bumatay's instruction to get another card through one of her companion (sic).

Sensing the implications, complainant excused herself once again and proceeded to the slot machine basement and explained to Mr. Bumatay the guest's predicament and dissatisfaction on (sic) his instructions. Immediately, Mr. Bumatay without meeting Mrs. Erlinda Tiozon approved right then and there said orders.

Immediately, complainant punched/encoded and processes (sic) the guest orders and served Mrs. Tiozon after that WITHOUT RECEIVING ANY COMPLAINT FROM HER."[5]

In contrast, the incident report[6] filed by PAGCOR-Heritage Slot Machine Head, Jeffrey Bumatay (or "Bumatay"), pertinently states:

"That O/A 2330H of April 30, 2011, based on Mrs. Tiozon('s) narration of the incident to the undersigned, while playing at HBC SM area she ordered food and drinks to (sic) FA Lilian Sio and told her that her PTS card was at the SM main basement area and if possible get the card for her so she could order food. However, Ms. Sio in an arrogant manner replied quote and unquote 'di ako pwede kumuha ng PTS card sa SM basement area.' Mrs. Tiozon felt insulted of (sic) her ill(-)mannered reply and told her that she is arrogant. Sensing Mrs. Tiozon was already mad, Ms. Sio took the order and proceeded to the SM basement area.

Ms. Sio's arrogance was also been (sic) experienced and noted by the undersigned when she approached and handed the order slip of Ms. Sio for approval. Undersigned asked Ms. Sio if there was no SM Supervisor at the HBC area, Ms. Sio in a sarcastic manner answered 'pupunta pa ba ako dito sa SM main area kung mayroong supervisor doon sa HBC.'"

Relying on Bumatay's brief narration of facts, Assistant Manager Corazon Sudario (or "Sudario") issued petitioner a memorandum[7] dated May 2, 2011 requiring her to give a written explanation on the following alleged offenses:

xxx xxx xxx

"Major Offense #09

'Show of discourtesy, disrespect or use offensive, obscene or insulting language or arrogance either by acts or words towards Hotel guests, clients, suppliers, superiors or fellow employees.'

Major Offense #10

'Creating or contributing to disturbance, or engaging in scandalous behavior, inside Hotel premises or committing any act which in any manner disturbs the peace and order within the company premises whether on or off duty.'

Major Offense #11

'Engaging another person into a heated or near violent arguments or discussions. This includes use of obscene, grave, profane and humiliating language against another person.'"

xxx xxx xxx

Incidentally, on May 3, 2011, petitioner's husband, William Sio, filed a complaint[8] decrying Sudario's inhumane treatment of petitioner when she forced the latter to receive the foregoing memorandum notwithstanding the fact that she was suffering from hypertension[9] on that day. The complaint, addressed to Grace Magsalin, HRD Director of Heritage reads:

"May 3, 2011

To: Miss Gracie Magsalin, HRD Director

Subject: Complaint letter to Miss Corazon Zudario

I was in the cafeteria at around 1:30 pm when Mr. Chito Balazo told me that my wife is in the clinic because of hypertension. Then I ask the Doctor about her condition, her BP was 140/100, this is not her regular BP. The Doctor ask her to rest first before she will be sent home, so doing that my wife told me that before she go home Cora ask the nurse to go to their office. Lilian my wife go to their office and while seeing Miss Cora Zudario and giving her the Memo, my wife was surprised because of the Memo that she will be receiving and told Miss Cora that she is not in condition but Miss Cora insisted to sign the Memo. Her BP increase to 160/100.

My concern is Ms. Corazon Zudario's Inhumane Persistent to accept the Memo in spite of her condition and she will held liable on (sic) whatever happened to my wife.

(Sgd.)

William Sio – Receiving Costcontrol

Husband"

On May 13, 2011, petitioner submitted her written explanation[10] denying Bumatay's allegations, further pointing out that she had never been accused of such charges during her almost seventeen (17) years of service. Moreover, Tiozon, the alleged complainant, never made any formal complaint against her. Finally, there was no evidence showing that she used obscene language or behaved in a scandalous manner. Heritage rejected petitioner's explanation. Thus, she was suspended for a period of one (1) week or from June 7 to June 14, 2011.[11]

Petitioner served said suspension. Then, a second incident allegedly occurred at the premises of Heritage. On September 21, 2011 as narrated by one Zaldy C. Ramirez[12] of Heritage Security Division, to wit:

"At around 3:20pm of this date, Hotel F&B Assistant Manager Cora Sudario accompanied a female customer later identifies as Ms. Mussa Mendoza to file a complaint against Hotel Food Attendant (FA) Lilian Sio for alleged discourtesy at the Le Café 88 dining area.

Based on the complaint at around 9:30pm on September 21, 2011, the complaint (sic) and her companion approached FA SIO at Le Café dining are (sic) to follow up their order [CLUBHOUSE] if it was already cancelled or not. The latter allegedly replied that her order was already cancelled by an unidentified female customer who ordered from her earlier. Thereafter, FA SIO approached the said unidentified customer then allegedly remarked 'Ikaw na mag explain sa kanya at baka maghanap pa siya' which prompted Ms. Mendoza to get irk (sic) and embarrassed as she feels like she was a dog looking for a (sic) food to eat.

After hearing her complaint, Assistant Manager SUDARIO relayed the matter to Hotel F&B Manager Gladys (sic) BIALA and Hotel HR Director Grazie MAGSALIN who summoned FA SIO at the Investigation Section to clarify the complaint. However, FA SIO denied uttering the said remarks and said that she just approached the unidentified female customer who ordered the food of Ms. Mendoza to explain that the latter's order was already cancelled. Subsequently, FA SIO asked for an apology to the complainant for whatever shortcoming on her part. However, Ms. MENDOZA did not accept the apology and left the casino premises after extending her gratitude for the accommodation given by this office to her."

Accordingly, on October 5, 2011 petitioner was issued a second memorandum[13] requiring her again to explain in writing as to why no disciplinary action should be imposed against him for commission of the same offenses as enumerated in the earlier memorandum dated May 2, 2011, and in addition thereto, the following major offense:

"Major Offense #28

'Issuing statements or committing acts inimical to Hotel's image, interest or reputation."

Petitioner maintained that she never directly spoke to the complainant, Mussa Mendoza (or "Mendoza");[14] Sudario exaggerated the incident by bringing Mendoza to the Security Office instead of trying to settle the problem in her capacity as Assistant Manager; and that the "unidentified" woman that she was referring too, Anabelle Mongado, belied Mendoza's claim. Heritage rejected petitioner's explanation. Consequently, she was suspended for a period of two (2) weeks or from October 18 to November 2, 2011, with a warning that a third offense of a similar nature would warrant her dismissal from employment.[15]

Aggrieved, petitioner filed against private respondents a complaint[16] for unfair labor practice, illegal suspension and other monetary claims before the arbitration branch of the NLRC. On April 24, 2012, the LA rendered judgment dismissing the complaint, disposing as follows:

"WHEREFORE, judgment is hereby rendered dismissing the present complaint for lack of merit.

SO ORDERED."[17]

Petitioner launched an appeal before the NLRC, to no avail. The NLRC denied the appeal in the assailed decision of July 31, 2012. It decreed:

"WHEREFORE, the Complainant's Appeal is DENIED and the Decision of the Labor Arbiter dated 24 April, 2012 is AFFIRMED.

SO ORDERED."[18]

Petitioner's motion for reconsideration was likewise denied in the assailed resolution of September 18, 2012.

Hence the present recourse, petitioner raising the following issues:

I.

THE HONORABLE COMMISSION COMMITTED GRAVE ABUSE OF DISCRETION AMOUNTING TO LACK OR EXCESS OF JURISDICTION IN HOLDING THAT THE SUSPENSIONS OF PETITIONER SIO WERE VALID.

II.

THE HONORABLE COMMISSION COMMITTED GRAVE ABUSE OF DISCRETION AMOUNTING TO LACK OR EXCESS OF JURISDICTION IN FINDING THAT NO UNFAIR LABOR PRACTICE WAS COMMITTED.[19]

Petitioner contends that Heritage gravely violated her rights when it twice found her guilty of the major offenses attributed by its officers without sufficient factual and legal basis therefor, and that the alleged unfair and unjust treatment that she received from Heritage was motivated by her active involvement in the employees' union. Hence, Heritage should be found liable for illegal suspension and unfair labor practice.

Private respondents counter that they were merely exercising their management prerogative when petitioner was meted out the penalties in question; that petitioner's asking for apologies from the two complaining guests can be construed as an admission that she committed serious infractions which were prejudicial and inimical to the company's interests; and that petitioner had already resigned from Heritage and there is no evidence to support her

claim of unfair labor practice. As such, they submit that the instant petition must be dismissed.

Generally, judicial review of labor cases does not go beyond the evaluation of the sufficiency of the evidence upon which its labor officials' findings rest.[20] Findings of fact made by LA and affirmed by the NLRC are not only entitled to great respect, but even finality, and are considered binding if the same are supported by substantial evidence.[21] However, the rule is not absolute and admits of certain well-recognized exceptions. Thus, when the findings of fact of the LA and the NLRC are not supported by substantial evidence or their judgment was based on a misapprehension of facts, the appellate court may make an independent evaluation of the facts of the case. Moreover, where the party's contention appears to be clearly tenable, or where the broader interest of justice and public policy so requires, the court may, in a certiorari proceeding, correct the error committed.[22] We find sufficient justification for the application of the exception in this case.

The employer's right to conduct the affairs of its business, according to its own discretion and judgment, is well-recognized. An employer has a free reign and enjoys wide latitude of discretion to regulate all aspects of employment, including the prerogative to instill discipline in its employees and to impose penalties, including dismissal, upon erring employees. This is a management prerogative, where the free will of management to conduct its own affairs to achieve its purpose takes form. The only criterion to guide the exercise of its management prerogative is that the policies, rules and regulations on work-related activities of the employees must always be fair and reasonable and the corresponding penalties, when prescribed, commensurate to the offense involved and to the degree of the infraction.[23] Management has the prerogative to discipline its employees and to impose appropriate penalties on erring workers pursuant to company rules and regulations.[24]

We find that petitioner received disciplinary actions which, being founded on the most fragile grounds, are highly oppressive. It must be recalled that she was charged, and found guilty, of four major offenses, to wit:

Major Offense #09

Show of discourtesy, disrespect or use offensive, obscene or insulting language or arrogance either by acts or words towards Hotel guests, clients, suppliers, superiors or fellow employees.'

Major Offense #10

'reating or contributing to disturbance, or engaging in scandalous behavior, inside Hotel premises or committing any act which in any manner disturbs the peace and order within the company premises whether on or off duty.'

Major Offense #11

Engaging another person into a heated or near violent arguments or discussions. This includes use of obscene, grave, profane and humiliating language against another person.'

Major Offense #28

Issuing statements or committing acts inimical to Hotel's image, interest or reputation.

After a careful consideration of the facts, as narrated by private respondents themselves, the Court finds it particularly troubling that the LA and the NLRC adjudged petitioner guilty of these major infractions. For one, the acts as would constitute these major offenses, which were attributed to petitioner, had not been specified by private respondents. For another, no direct statements coming from the allegedly complaining guests of Heritage was ever adduced by private respondents to corroborate the claims that they were deeply offended by petitioner's actions.

With respect to her first suspension, petitioner allegedly uttered the words, "Di ako pwede kumuha ng PTS card sa SM basement area." And anent the second suspension, her only alleged remark, which was not even addressed to the supposedly complaining guest, but to a third party, was "Ikaw na mag explain sa kanya at baka maghanap pa

siya." These statements can hardly be considered as words of arrogance, nor obscene, offensive, insulting or scandalous. We likewise find nothing offensive in the words that she allegedly uttered to her superiors, i.e: "Pupunta pa ba ako dito sa SM main area kung mayroong supervisor doon sa HBC(?)" Too, it does not appear that petitioner had inflicted harm upon Heritage's image, interest or reputation. And to hold that petitioner's actions constituted conduct tending to create or contribute to disturbance or scandalous behavior, or that she engaged other persons into heated or near violent arguments or discussions, would be to clutch at the flimsiest of straws.

Apart from the incident reports prepared by Heritage's officers, We find no other evidence to prove that petitioner committed any of the four major offenses attributed to her.

Bumatay's April 30, 2011 incident report is bereft of any evidentiary value because, as he himself admitted, he was not with petitioner and Tiozon when petitioner allegedly showed disrespect to the latter, then a hotel's guest. He had no personal knowledge of the words that petitioner allegedly uttered to Tiozon. It is a basic rule in evidence that a witness can testify only on the facts that he knows of his own personal knowledge, i.e. those which are derived from his own perception.[25] Likewise, the Court cannot overlook the fact that this incident report has two versions – the one[26] that contains Tiozon's alleged attestation and another[27], which does not. The latter appears to be an afterthought aimed at rectifying an otherwise questionable account of the events in question. At any rate, both versions were not verified or sworn under oath. Then, too, the September 22, 2011 customer complaint report must also be considered as hearsay because the person who wrote the same had no personal knowledge of the events reported therein. It must be stressed that the rule excluding hearsay as evidence is based upon serious concerns about the trustworthiness and reliability of hearsay evidence due to its not being given under oath or solemn affirmation and due to its not being subjected to cross-examination by the opposing counsel or party, as the case may be, to test the perception, memory, veracity and articulateness of the out-of-court declarant or actor upon whose reliability the worth of the out-of-court statement depends.[28]

While it is true that administrative or quasi-judicial bodies like the NLRC are not bound by the technical rules of procedure in the adjudication of cases, this procedural rule should not be construed as a license to disregard certain fundamental evidentiary rules. The evidence presented must at least have a modicum of admissibility for it to have probative value.[29] The rule is that, in labor cases, substantial evidence or such relevant evidence as a reasonable mind might accept as sufficient to support a conclusion is required.[30] Thus, even though technical rules of evidence are not strictly complied with before the LA and the NLRC, their decision must be based on evidence that must, at the very least, be substantial.[31] Any decision based on unsubstantiated allegation cannot stand as it will offend due process.[32]

Disciplinary action against an erring employee is a management prerogative which, generally, is not subject to judicial interference. However, this policy can be justified only if the disciplinary action is dictated by legitimate business reasons and is not oppressive.[33] In view of the circumstances We have discussed, it is beyond dispute that petitioner was illegally suspended by Heritage.

On the issue of moral and exemplary damages, We find the same proper under the present circumstances. In moral damages, it suffices to prove that the claimant has suffered anxiety, sleepless nights, besmirched reputation and social humiliation by reason of the act complained of. Exemplary damages, on the other hand, are granted in addition to, inter alia, moral damages by way of example or correction for the public good if the employer acted in a wanton, fraudulent, reckless, oppressive or malevolent manner.[34] Thus, the Court hereby awards in favor of petitioner the amounts of P50,000.00 as moral damages and P50,000.00 as exemplary damages.

Nevertheless, We cannot sustain petitioner's claim of unfair labor practice (ULP). Jurisprudence holds that the

prohibited acts considered as ULP relate to the workers' right to self-organization and to the observance of a collective bargaining agreement (CBA). Thus, an employer may only be held liable for unfair labor practice if it can be shown that his acts affect in whatever manner the right of his employees to self-organize.[35] There is no showing that Heritage, in twice suspending petitioner, aimed at interfering with such right of its employees.

On a final note, it has been held that in labor cases, corporate directors and officers are held solidarily liable with the corporation for the termination of employment of employees done with malice or in bad faith.[36] Since the instant case merely involves illegal suspension, the Court holds that private respondents Eddie Yeo, Grazie Magsalin, Gladys Biala, and Corazon Sudario, who were not even shown to have acted with malice or in bad faith, may not be held solidarily liable with Heritage for the latter's obligation to compensate petitioner for the damages that she had suffered.

A writ of certiorari is an extraordinary prerogative writ that is never demandable as a matter of right. To warrant the issuance thereof, the abuse of discretion must have been so gross or grave, as when there was such capricious and whimsical exercise of judgment equivalent to lack of jurisdiction; or the exercise of power was done in an arbitrary or despotic manner by reason of passion, prejudice, or personal hostility. The abuse must have been committed in a manner so patent and so gross as to amount to an evasion of a positive duty or to a virtual refusal to perform the duty enjoined or to act at all in contemplation of law.[37] Such is obtaining in this case.

WHEREFORE, in light of all the foregoing, the petition is **PARTIALLY GRANTED**. Accordingly, the decision dated July 31, 2012 and resolution dated September 18, 2012 of public respondent National Labor Relations Commission in NLRC LAC No. 06-001823-12 are **ANNULLED** and **SET ASIDE**.

Private respondent, The Heritage Hotel, is found liable for illegal suspension and is hereby **ORDERED** to pay petitioner Lilian S. Sio the amount of P50,000.00 as moral damages and P50,000.00 as exemplary damages. This case is thus **REMANDED** to the Labor Arbiter for the computation, within 30 days from receipt hereof, of the backwages, inclusive of allowances and other benefits due petitioner, computed from the time her compensation was withheld up to the time of her actual reinstatement, in addition to the aforesaid amounts.

SO ORDERED.

Sadang, M.Q.C.,[*] and Corales, P.B., JJ., concur.

[*] Vice Justice Florito S. Macalino per Office Order No. 469-14-ABR dated November 14, 2014

[**] Impleaded as a party to the instant petition per resolution dated January 14, 2013, Rollo, p. 222

[1] Rollo, pp. 34-44.

[2] Rollo, pp. 45-46.

[3] Rollo, pp. 139-153.

[4] Petitioner herein.

[5] Rollo, pp. 53-54.

[6] Rollo, p. 70.

[7] Rollo, p. 64.

[8] Rollo, p. 65.

- [9] Rollo, p. 66-69.
- [10] Rollo, pp. 71-72.
- [11] Rollo, p. 74.
- [12] Rollo, p. 113.
- [13] Rollo, p. 75.
- [14] Rollo, pp. 76-77
- [15] Rollo, p. 78.
- [16] Rollo, pp. 82-83.
- [17] Rollo, p. 153.
- [18] Rollo, p. 43.
- [19] Rollo, p. 3.
- [20] La Union Cement Workers Union v. NLRC, G.R. No. 174621, January 30, 2009.
- [21] Malayang Manggagawa ng Stayfast Phils., Inc. v. NLRC, G.R. No. 155306, August 28, 2013.
- [22] AMA Computer College-East Rizal v. Allan Raymond R. Ignacio, G.R. No. 178520, June 23, 2009.
- [23] The Coca-Cola Export Corporation v. Clarita P. Gacayan, G.R. No. 149433, December 15, 2010.
- [24] Vicente Villanueva, Jr. v. NLRC, G.R. No. 176893, June 13, 2012.
- [25] Primo V. Miro v. Marilyn Mendoza Vda. de Erederos, G.R. Nos. 172532, 172544-45, November 20, 2013.
- [26] Rollo, p. 70.
- [27] Rollo, p. 107.
- [28] Anna Lerima Patula v. People of the Philippines, G.R. No. 164457, April 11, 2012.
- [29] Lepanto Consolidated Mining Company v. Moreno Dumapis, G.R. No. 163210, August 13, 2008.
- [30] Rexie A. Hormillosa v. Coca-Cola Bottlers, Phils., Inc., G.R. No. 198699, October 9, 2013.
- [31] Lepanto Consolidated Mining Company v. Moreno Dumapis, *supra*.
- [32] Oriental Shipmanagement Co., Inc. v. Rainerio N. Nazal, G.R. No. 177103, June 3, 2013.
- [33] Jimmy Aren0, Jr. v. SkyCable PCC-Baguio, G.R. No. 180302, February 5, 2010.
- [34] Philippine Aeolus Auto-Motive United Corporation v. NLRC, G.R. No. 124617, April 28, 2000.
- [35] Nelson A. Culili v. Eastern Telecommunications Philippines, Inc., G.R. No. 165381, February 9, 2011.
- [36] Polymer Rubber Corporation v. Bayolo Salamuding, G.R. No. 185160, July 24, 2013.
- [37] Ebren0 F. Indoyon, Jr. v. Court of Appeals, G.R. No. 193706, March 12, 2013.

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