

NFSW-FGT/ JESSIE A. MESIORADO, ALMA IBAÑEZ, MARJALENE MARTINEZ, REGINA GARCIA, MA. ANA M. RENDOQUE, MA. LUZ F. SONET, CHONA RENDOQUE, ARNALDO E. VALENCIA, CARIDAD D. CALUMAG, RO...

Ponente: QUIJANO-PADILLA, J.

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QUIJANO-PADILLA, J.:

Before Us is a petition for certiorari assailing the Resolution[1] dated November 15, 2010 of the National Labor Relations Commisison, 7[th] Division, Cebu City in NLRC Case No. VAC-04-000221-2010 [RAB Case No. VI-06-10500-2008] for Illegal Dismissal, Underpayment of Wages, Non-Payment of Service Incentive Leave Pay and 13[th] Month Pay, Moral and Exemplary Damages and Attorney's Fees.

The Facts

The twenty [20] petitioners namely: Jessie A. Mesiorado, Alma Ibañez, Marjalene Martinez, Regina Garcia, Ma. Ana M. Rendoque, Ma. Luz F. Sonet, Chona Rendoque, Arnaldo E. Valencia, Caridad D. Calumag, Rodolfo B. Rendoque, Samuel M. Canoy, Jerry Mesiorado, Marivic Garcia, Marjun Martinez, Sanny Mesiorado, Rodel Mesiorado, Rio Garcia, Jocelyn Calumag, Andrew Ibañez and Alfe Ibañez in their petition for certiorari declare that private respondent Isabelita Montinola [Montinola] operates a number of sugarcane plantations in Cadiz City. She owns Hacienda Marianas and sometime in 1999, she leased Hacienda San Jose, a contiguous sugarcane plantation from Crisogono Abdun. Montinola absorbed the workers of Hacienda San Jose and merged its operations with Hacienda Marianas.

As laborers of Montinola, petitioners worked for 8 hours a day, 7 days a week and were paid either on a daily basis at the rate of P90.00 per day or on a pakyaw basis. They were not paid their holiday pay, service incentive leave pay and their 13[th] month pay which prompted them to file a labor standard complaint before the Department of Labor and Employment [DOLE] against Montinola.

On September 6, 2005, DOLE inspected private respondent's work premises pursuant to the complaint and discovered a number of violations, which are as follows:

- “3. Underpayment of wages in daily and pakyao works per WO #11, 12, and 13;
4. As a result of the above-underpayment of 13[th] mo.pay;
5. Non payment of 5 days SI (service incentive) Leave Pay;
6. Non-coverage of members with SSS; and
7. Non-provision of first-aid medicine in the hacienda.”[2]

When petitioners reported for duty sometime at the end of July 2005, they were surprised when they were told by the hacienda's encargado Ereno Makihilig that they would no longer be receiving any work assignments from the hacienda. Upon demand for an explanation, they were told to go to the hacienda's foreman, Paquito Bermejo [Bermejo]. At the residence of Bermejo, they were told that the decision to terminate them was solely decided by Montinola, allegedly because she was furious about the labor standards complaint they filed against her.

Based on that information, petitioners went to see Montinola at her residence but they were not able to talk to her but instead they were met by Montinola's accountant whom they know as one Mr. Salba. During the confrontation, Mr. Salba asked them about their demands and they communicated to the accountant their desire to be paid what is due them as well as to continue working at the hacienda. However, Mr. Salba firmly told them that should they desire to have their work back, they should first secure the dismissal of the DOLE complaint. Since they did not withdraw the DOLE case, consequently, they were no longer given any work assignments at the hacienda.

Nonetheless, Montinola complied with the DOLE order mandating her to pay the eighteen [18] complainants namely: Caridad Calumag, Jocelyn Calumag, Samuel Canoy, Marivic Garcia, Regina Garcia, Reo Garcia, Marialyn Martinez, Marjun Martinez, Jerry Mesiorado, Jessie Mesiorado, Rodel Mesiorado, Sunny Mesiorado, Ana Rendoque, Chona Rendoque, Rodolfo Rendoque, Danilo Sonet, Ma. Luz Sonet and Arnaldo Valencia their respective wage differential, 13[th] month pay and 5 days SIL.[3] Subsequent to Montinola's compliance, the DOLE complaint was thereafter dismissed on February 23, 2006.[4]

Three [3] of the complainants namely Alma, Andrew and Alfe all surnamed Ibañez were excluded in the settlement of the said case hence, with the assistance of NFSW-FGT, they lodged a complaint before the Labor Arbiter on June 25, 2008 for Illegal Dismissal with Reinstatement and Backwages, Money Claims and Non-Payment of Service Incentive Leave Pay, Underpayment of the 13[th] Month Pay and Moral and Exemplary Damages and Attorney's Fees against Haciendas Marianas and San Jose, Isabelita Montinola and Paquita Torres.[5] The following persons filed the said complaint: Anicito Calumag, Alfredo H. Ibañez, Rodrigo Renduque,[6] Alma Ibañez, Chona Rendoque, Caridad Calumag, Jessie Mesiorado and Rodel Mesiorado.[7]

The Labor Arbiter in its Decision[8] dated January 29, 2010, concluded that the said complainants were dismissed without any legal basis and the same was done without the observance of due process. Records show that the labor standards case of the complainants did not include their claim for illegal dismissal with prayer for reinstatement and backwages so that it was the office of the Labor Arbiter to rule on the matter. As further revealed by the records, since reinstatement is no longer feasible as the contract of lease of Montinola with Hacienda San Jose ended sometime in 2006, the complainants should then be paid separation pay which is equivalent to one [1] month pay for every year of service computed from the time they were denied work in July 2005 until the end of the contract in 2006.

With respect to the three [3] complainants who were excluded in the DOLE computation, the Labor Arbiter granted them an award for the payment of Service Incentive Leave Pay, the balance of their 13[th] Month Pay as well as their Wage Differentials in the total amount of P80,328.50. The Labor Arbiter however, denied the claims for moral and exemplary damages for complainants' failure to prove the same. They were likewise awarded attorney's fees. The dispositive portion of the Labor Arbiter's Decision, reads:

“WHEREFORE, premises considered, judgment is hereby rendered ORDERING respondents Hda. San Jose/ Hda. Marianas/ Isabelita Montinola to pay jointly and severally the following complainants, to wit:

Name of Complainants Wage Differentials 13[th] Month Pay Service Incentive Leave Pay Separation Pay

Alma Ibañez P2,730.00 P520.00 P100.00 P24,960.00

Andrew Ibañez P5,760.30 P520.00 P211.00 P20,800.00

Alfe Ibañez P2,730.00 P520.00 P100.00 P20,800.00

in the total amount of Eighty Thousand Three Hundred Twenty Eight Pesos (P80,328.50) plus ten percent (10%) hereof as attorney's fees or in the total award of EIGHTY EIGHT THOUSAND THREE HUNDRED

SIXTY ONE PESOS & 35/100 (Php88,361.35) to be deposited with this Office within ten (10) days from receipt of this decision.

All other claims are hereby dismissed for lack of merit.

SO ORDERED.”[9]

Private respondent appealed from the said decision,[10] contending that the Labor Arbiter erred in finding that the complainants were illegally dismissed because facts would show that said complainants were not given work for the sole reason of the expiration of the lease of the Hacienda San Jose. With respect to the monetary award in favor of the three [3] Ibañezes, private respondent claims that this was a clear error on the part of the Labor Arbiter because DOLE, upon inspection pronounced that they are not “legitimate complainant-workers”. To sum up, the work of the three were not regular because they just worked a few days in a month. More importantly, even if the monetary claims of Andrew and Alfe Ibañez really existed, the same had already prescribed by the time they lodged the case before the Labor Arbiter on June 25, 2008 as the cause of action accrued sometime on January 2005 and May 2004, respectively when they were supposedly dismissed from work. Lastly, some of the signatures of the complainants were visibly forged warranting a dismissal of their complaint.[11]

On the other hand, complainants appealed the Labor Arbiter's decision contending that they were all entitled to separation pay but only Alma, Andrew and Alfe Ibañez were awarded the same.[12]

The NLRC in squarely addressing all the issues raised by the parties pronounced in its Decision[13] dated July 30, 2010, that indeed, the complainants were illegally dismissed because even if it be true that sometime in July 2005, farm work may already be waning, the same is only a mere coincidence, the termination of the complainants were effected even prior to the termination of the lease contract. As such, the NLRC sustained the findings of the Labor Arbiter with respect to the monetary awards in favor of the the three [3] Ibañezes and respondents were likewise ordered to pay the other complainants separation pay inclusive of attorney's fees in the aggregate amount of P277,452.00). Lastly, the issue regarding the forged signatures were dismissed by the NLRC stating that it was incumbent upon Montinola to prove the same, having failed to do so, the said issue should be struck down.

Hence, the fallo of the NLRC Decision, reads:

“WHEREFORE, premises considered, the judgment of the Labor Arbiter, dated 29 January 2010, finding respondents guilty of illegal dismissal and awarding monetary benefits to complainants Alma Ibañez, Andrew Ibañez and Alfie (sic) Ibañez in the total amount of P88,361.35 is hereby, affirmed. Further, respondents are, hereby ordered to pay the other complainants, separation pay, inclusive of attorney's fees, in the aggregate sum of TWO HUNDRED SEVENTY SEVEN THOUSAND FOUR HUNDRED FIFTY TWO PESOS (Php277,452.00), the particulars of which are shown in the attached computation.

Other claims are dismissed for lack of merit.

SO ORDERED.”[14]

Undaunted, private respondent in her motion for reconsideration,[15] asseverated that the finding by the NLRC of illegal dismissal is based on conjecture and not supported by facts and the grant of the monetary benefits in favor of Alma, Andrew and Alfe Ibañez has no basis in fact. Lastly, the wage order prevailing in 2005-2006 is Wage Order No. 13 not Wage Order No. 18 which sets the daily minimum wage at P218.

In resolving the said motion, the NLRC rendered the controverted resolution on November 15, 2010, explaining that it remained steadfast in its resolve that complainants were illegally dismissed however, upon second thought, NLRC reversed its findings with respect to the award of the monetary claims of the three Ibañezes, stating that the finding of the DOLE inspector in excluding the three [3] people remained uncontested and that no undue

interference was shown to have occurred during the inspection and the results thereof do not appear to be flawed. Moreover, records do not show that any of the complainants filed a protest against the afore-stated findings of the DOLE Inspector which enjoys the presumption of regularity. It further found out that the said complaints did not question the veracity of the payrolls relied upon by private respondent. The NLRC further observed that the said complainants did not even lift a finger to refute respondents' disavowal of their alleged employment.

On the issue regarding forgery, the NLRC upon closer scrutiny found that the signatures of Jessie Mesiorado, Chona Rendoque, Samuel Canoy, Jerry Mesiorado, Marjun Martinez, Marjalene Martinez, Sanny Mesiorado, Rodel Mesiorado, Andrew Ibañez and Alfe Ibañez are in fact spurious. The NLRC stated that it was baffled by complainants' passivity and silence regarding the said issue in that they could have submitted the specimen signatures of the concerned signatories or complainants and have them attested to by a competent authority if only to guard and protect their cause instead of remaining mum about it. For the said reason, the instant case should have been dismissed with respect to the above-mentioned persons.

Hence, the dispositive portion of the said resolution, reads:

“WHEREFORE, premises considered, the instant Motion for Reconsideration is, hereby granted in part, dismissing the instant complaint with respect to complainants Alma, Andrew and Alfie (sic) Ibañez for lack of cause of action, and with respect to complainants Jessie Mesiorado, Chona Rendoque, Samuel Canoy, Jerry Mesiorado, Marjun Martinez, Marjalene Martinez, Sanny Mesiorado, Rodel Mesiorado, Andrew Ibañez and Alfie (sic) Ibañez for failure to duly sign their complaint. The finding of illegal dismissal and award of separation pay remain with respect to the following complainants:

1. Calumag, Caridad D.
2. Calumag, Jocelyn B.
3. Garcia, Marivic M.
4. Garcia, Regina M.
5. Garcia, Rio P.
6. Rendoque, Ma. Ana M.
7. Rendoque, Rodulfo B.
8. Sonet, Danilo D.
9. Sonet, Luz F.
10. Valencia, Arnaldo E.

SO ORDERED.”[16]

From the adverse ruling, complainants now in their motion for reconsideration[17] assert that there was nothing in the narrative report of the DOLE Inspector that would suggest that the Ibanezes should not be considered legitimate employees. On the contrary, respondents themselves admitted to have employed the Ibanezes even for a brief period of time and said admission resolves the legitimacy of the controversy.

On January 24, 2011, the NLRC in its Resolution, denied complainants' motion for reconsideration[18] hence, the instant petition for certiorari with the following assignment of errors, to wit:

“I. THE PUBLIC RESPONDENT NLRC COMMITTED GRAVE ABUSE OF DISCRETION AMOUNTING TO WANT AND EXCESS OF JURISDICTION WHEN IT DISMISSED THE COMPLAINT WITH RESPECT TO ALMA, ANDREW AND ALFIE (sic) IBAÑEZ FOR LACK OF CAUSE OF ACTION; and

II. THE PUBLIC RESPONDENT NLRC COMMITTED GRAVE ABUSE OF DISCRETION AMOUNTING TO WANT AND EXCESS OF JURISDICTION WHEN IT DISMISSED THE COMPLAINANT WITH RESPECT TO JESSIE MESIORADO, CHONA RENDUQUE, SAMUEL CANY, JESSIE MESIORADO, MARJUN IBANEZ, MARJELENE MARTINEZ, SANNY MESIORADO, RODEL MESIORADO,

ANDREW IBANEZ, AND ALFIE (sic) IBANEZ FOR FAILURE TO DULY SIGN THEIR COMPLAINT.”[19]

Our Ruling

In the instant petition for certiorari, We have gathered that the three petitioners, the Ibanezes, assail the findings of the NLRC declaring them as not among the roster of employees of the hacienda and thereby deleting the monetary award previously awarded to them by the Labor Arbiter.

In illegal dismissal cases, the petitioner needs to show by substantial evidence that he was indeed an employee of the company or in this the case, the hacienda against which he claims illegal dismissal. It is essential that an employer-employee relationship be proved by substantial evidence.[20]

In the instant case, the record is bereft of any evidence that would tend to prove that such employer-employee relationship existed between the complainants and the herein respondents. This claim of the existence of employer-employee relationship is vehemently denied by the respondents. Moreover, while it is true that in this jurisdiction, the burden of proof lies in the party against whom the allegation lies however, this doctrine does not apply in case the party (in the instant case, the respondents) denies such fact or allegation of employer-employee relationship. In the latter case, the burden of evidence is momentarily shifted to the complainants until they have shown sufficient facts establishing their allegation that they were employees of respondents.[21]

The Supreme Court in *Javier v. Fly Ace Corporation, et al.*[22] went on to elaborate that:

“No particular form of evidence is required to prove the existence of such employer-employee relationship. Any competent and relevant evidence to prove the relationship may be admitted. Hence, while no particular form of evidence is required, a finding that such relationship exists must still rest on some substantial evidence. Moreover, the substantiality of the evidence depends on its quantitative as well as its qualitative aspects. Although substantial evidence is not a function of quantity but rather of quality, the x x x circumstances of the instant case demand that something more should have been proffered. Had there been other proofs of employment, such as x x x inclusion in petitioner’s payroll, or a clear exercise of control, the Court would have affirmed the finding of employer-employee relationship.

In sum, the rule of thumb remains: the onus probandi falls on petitioner to establish or substantiate such claim by the requisite quantum of evidence. Whoever claims entitlement to the benefits provided by law should establish his or her right thereto x x x.”

We are of the considerable view that on the three Ibañezes lie the burden to pass the well-settled tests to determine the existence of an employer-employee relationship, viz: (1) the selection and engagement of the employee; (2) the payment of wages; (3) the power of dismissal; and (4) the power to control the employee’s conduct. Of these elements, the most important criterion is whether the employer controls or has reserved the right to control the employee not only as to the result of the work but also as to the means and methods by which the result is to be accomplished.[23]

In this case, petitioners were not able to persuade Us that the above elements exist. They could not submit competent proof that the hacienda engaged their services as regular employees; that the hacienda paid their wages as employees, or that the hacienda could dictate what their conduct should be while at work. In other words, petitioners’ allegations did not establish that their relationship with the respondents had the attributes of an employer-employee relationship on the basis of the above-mentioned four-fold test. In short, all that the three petitioners laid down were bare allegations without corroborative proof.[24] On the other hand, respondents adduced evidence showing that the three petitioners’ work was intermittent and irregular. Verily, the NLRC was correct in not accepting the three petitioners’ statement that they were the hacienda’s employees hook, line and

sinker.

Moreover, the said petitioners were excluded by the DOLE Inspector in the computation of the benefits exclusive for employees because they already stopped working therefrom at the time of inspection. In line with that, We have observed that when the DOLE made a determination that the three Ibanezes were not employees of the hacienda, the latter did not question the same. The said pronouncement of the DOLE is not infallible or the same is not beyond question or review, appeal therefrom is always available to the aggrieved party. However, in the instant case records are bereft of any evidence that the three Ibañezes appealed from or question the adverse decision making one think that said persons must have submitted to the findings of DOLE. It is likewise worthwhile to note that with the pronouncement of the DOLE declaring that they were excluded as employees of the hacienda, it took them two [2] years to file an illegal dismissal case against respondents.

At this juncture, is worthy to quote the findings of the NLRC, thus:

“It bears to stress, that the findings of the DOLE Inspector, up to this date remain uncontested. No undue interference was shown to have occurred during the inspection and the results thereof do not appear to be flawed. Moreover, records do not show that any of the complainants filed a protest against the afore-stated findings. Thus, it is but proper to accord credence the findings of the DOLE Inspector which enjoys the presumption of regularity.

xxxxx

We have likewise observed that the complainants did not question the veracity of the payrolls relied upon by respondents and on which the Labor Inspector based her findings. xxxxx

Respondents persistently stressed the non-inclusion of the three Ibañez complainants in the DOLE computation assailed the monetary award in their favor by the Labor Arbiter and brought the same issue before Us in the instant Motion for Reconsideration. Quite surprisingly, the subject complainants did not even lift a finger to refute respondents' disavowal of their alleged employment. We wonder how they could be so nonchalant about this issue when their cause of action, illegal dismissal, is premised in particular on the existence of the employer-employee relationship between them and herein respondents. Allegations never controverted at any stage of the proceedings could affirm that such averments were true. xxxx”[25]

Petitioners went on to contend that the monetary award in their favor previously granted by the Labor Arbiter already attained finality because it was never the subject of an appeal before the NLRC. Records belie the assertion of the petitioners, both parties appealed the Labor Arbiter's decision to the NLRC as evidenced by the Notice of Appeal filed by the petitioners on May 17, 2010[26] while private respondents likewise filed the Notice of Appeal dated March 12, 2006 (sic).[27] So that the monetary awards initially awarded by the Labor Arbiter to Alma, Andrew and Alfe Ibañez had not yet become final and executory because as a matter of fact the same was vehemently opposed by the respondents.

Going now to the issue about forgery. Jurisprudence state that a finding of forgery does not depend entirely on the testimonies of handwriting experts, because the judge must conduct an examination of the questioned signature in order to arrive at a reasonable conclusion as to its authenticity. The opinions of handwriting experts are not binding upon courts, especially when the question involved is mere handwriting similarity or dissimilarity, which can be determined by a visual comparison of specimens of the questioned signatures with those of the currently existing ones. Moreover, Section 22 of Rule 132 of the Rules of Court likewise explicitly authorizes the court, by itself, to make a comparison of the disputed handwriting “with writings admitted or treated as genuine by the party against whom the evidence is offered, or proved to be genuine to the satisfaction of the judge.[28]

In like manner, the Rules of Court having suppletory application in the NLRC cases, the commissioner after

sifting through the evidence submitted by the respondent[29] found that it was glaring that the signatures of the ten [10] petitioners, namely: Jessie Mesiorado, Chona Rendoque, Samuel Canoy, Jerry Mesiorado, Marjun Martinez, Marjalene Martinez, Sanny Mesiorado, Rodel Mesiorado, Andrew Ibañez and Alfe Ibañez were indeed forged. In light of the glaring and major discrepancies as illustrated by the respondents, it behooves upon the petitioners whose signatures were placed in issue to prove otherwise. However, as pointed out by the NLRC, petitioners were not able to dispute the evidence of the respondents and they have remained passive about it.[30]

Indeed, the function of a motion for reconsideration is to point out to the court the error that it may have committed and to give it a chance to correct itself the rationale thereof is that the law intends to afford the NLRC an opportunity to rectify such errors or mistakes it may have lapsed into before resort to the courts of justice can be had.[31] Thus, We laud the NLRC in so doing.

We conclude with the oft-repeated rule stating that appellate courts accord the factual finding of the labor tribunal not only respect but also finality when supported by substantial evidence, unless there is showing that the labor tribunal arbitrarily disregarded evidence before them or misapprehended evidence of such nature as to compel a contrary conclusion if properly appreciated.[32] None of said instance were present in the instant case.

WHEREFORE, in view of the foregoing, the Resolution dated November 15, 2010 of the National Labor Relations Commisison, 7th Division, Cebu City in NLRC Case No. VAC-04-000221-2010 [RAB Case No. VI-06-10500-2008] for Illegal Dismissal, Underpayment of Wages, Non-Payment of Service Incentive Leave Pay and 13[th] Month Pay, Moral and Exemplary Damages and Attorney's Fees is hereby AFFIRMED in toto.

SO ORDERED.

Hernando, J., Chairperson, and [*]Lopez, JJ., concur.

[*] Vice Justice Marie Christine Azcarraga-Jacob, Office Order No. 01-15-GTI, January 22, 2015

[1] Rollo, pp. 17-27, penned by the Honorable Commissioner Julie C. Rendoque

[2] Rollo, p. 92

[3] Rollo, p. 63

[4] Rollo, p. 64

[5] Rollo, p. 66

[6] Rollo, p. 40

[7] Rollo, p. 41

[8] Rollo, pp. 66-74, penned by the Honorable Executive Labor Arbiter Rene G. Eñano

[9] Rollo, pp. 73-74

[10] Rollo, p.79

[11] Rollo, pp. 80-87

[12] Rollo, pp. 76-77

[13] Rollo, pp. 90-103

[14] Rollo, p. 102

[15] Rollo, pp. 104-108

[16] Rollo, pp. 26-27

[17] Rollo, pp. 109-114

[18] Rollo, pp. 28-33

[19] Rollo, p. 8

[20] Javier v. Fly Ace Corporation, et al., G.R. No.192558, February 15, 2012

[21] Commander Realty, Inc. v. Fernandez, et al., G.R. No. 167945, July 14, 2006

[22] G.R. No. 192558, February 15, 2012

[23] Javier v. Fly Ace Corporation, et al., G.R. No.192558, February 15, 2012

[24] Javier v. Fly Ace Corporation, et al., G.R. No.192558, February 15, 2012

[25] Rollo, pp. 20-22

[26] Rollo, p. 75

[27] Rollo, p. 79

Note: Upon perusal of respondents' Appeal Memorandum (Rollo, pp. 80-87), it was shown that they have received the RAB Decision on March 3, 2010.

[28] Manzano, Jr. v. Garcia, G.R. No. 179323, November 28, 2011

[29] Rollo, p. 89, Table showing the comparison of the disputed signatures

[30] Rollo, p. 23

[31] Dela Rosa Development Corporation, et al. v. CA, et al., G.R. No. 148470, April 29, 2005

[32] E Pacific Global Contact Center, Inc., et al. v. Cabansay, G.R. No.167345, November 23, 2007

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