

VIRGINIA G. RAMORAN, PETITIONER, VS. JARDINE CMG LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY, INC., RESPONDENT.

G.R. No. 131943. February 22, 2000

Ponente: DE LEON, JR., J.

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DE LEON, JR., J.:

Before us is a petition for review on certiorari of the twin resolutions of the Court of Appeals[1] dated August 27, 1997[2] and December 22, 1997[3], which upheld the decision of the Panel of Voluntary Arbitrators to dismiss petitioner Virginia G. Ramoran whom they found guilty of falsifying her overtime authorization slips in violation of Rule No. 32 of the Company Rules and Regulations issued by respondent Jardine CMG Life Insurance Company, Inc. (hereafter, "Jardine").

The facts are:

Petitioner Ramoran started working with Jardine on June 6, 1976 as an accounting clerk. She rose thru the ranks and held the position of junior accountant in 1994. Antonio Robles, then Manager of the Accounting Department of respondent Jardine, was her immediate supervisor.[4]

On December 7, 1993,[5] the Human Resources Development (hereafter, "HRD") of Jardine, received from petitioner an overtime (OT) authorization slip dated December 6, 1993, covering her alleged overtime work on November 16, 17, 18, 22, 23 and 24, 1993.[6] Jardine paid petitioner overtime pay for the said days as included in the payroll for the period of December 1-15, 1993.[7]

On December 15, 1993,[8] the HRD received an OT authorization slip dated December 14, 1993, prepared by petitioner, covering the overtime work allegedly rendered by her on December 13 and 14, 1993.[9] The HRD paid petitioner overtime pay for the two (2) days, as included in the next payroll covering the period of December 16-31, 1993.[10]

It is a company rule of respondent Jardine that an OT authorization slip must pertain to only one (1) date when the overtime was rendered. The OT authorization slip must also contain the following instructions: (1) that the department supervisor must forward the OT authorization slip to the guard on duty not later than 5:00 o'clock in the afternoon of the working day before the authorized overtime; (2) that the guard on duty in turn is required to transmit the OT authorization slip to the HRD not later than 9:00 o'clock in the morning of the following day; and (3) that no payment for OT work may be made unless the OT authorization slip is properly accomplished.

On December 18, 1993, Yolanda S. Carreon, HRD Clerk, together with Amelia F. Castillo, HRD Assistant, in the course of preparing and post-auditing payroll payments, noticed some irregularities in the overtime slips, dated December 6 and December 14, 1993, submitted by petitioner.[11]

The OT authorization slip, dated December 6, 1993, covered alleged overtime work on six (6) days, November 16, 17, 18, 22, 23, and 24, 1993, as appearing from the entries under the headings "Overtime Date" and "Actual Time". Said slip was prepared only on December 6, 1993 and signed by the security guard on December 7, 1993,

or long after the stated days on which petitioner had supposedly worked overtime.[12]

The OT authorization slip dated December 14, 1993, covered the alleged overtime work for two (2) days on December 13 and 14, 1993, as appearing from the entries under the heading "Overtime Date" and "Department", "Name", and Actual Time". Said OT slip appeared to have been tampered with. In the declared overtime dates of "December 13 and 14, 1993", the words "13 &" as well as the caret mark "^" indicated the mere addition of "13 &" to the basic entry "December 14, 1993". Moreover, the entries "Roderick Paat" of the "Admin. (Department)" for the purpose "To file BPI Checks" "from 5:00 to 9:00 (p.m.)" had been cancelled or crossed out without the verifying initials of the approving Department Head. Below such cancellation, petitioner entered the date "Dec. 13/93" and "Dec. 14/93" under the heading "Dept.," and filled out the corresponding blanks for "Name", "Reason" and "Authorized Time" to cover her purported overtime work on December 13 and 14, 1993.[13]

The matter was brought to the attention of Ms. Aida N. Hornilla, HRD Supervisor, who in turn called the attention of Norman T. Tamayo, HRD Manager.[14]

In a Memorandum dated January 4, 1994, Tamayo called the attention of Robles who approved petitioner's OT authorization slips.[15]

On February 1, 1994, respondent Jardine conducted an administrative investigation concerning petitioner. Present were petitioner herself, Ms. Hornilla, Tamayo, Robles, Rommel Muñoz, President of the Jardine CMG Life Union (hereafter, "Jardine union"), and Ms. Ma. Teresa Luague, Secretary of the Jardine union.[16]

During the said proceedings, Tamayo opened the discussion by emphasizing the purpose of the meeting, that is, to clarify issues regarding the overtime rendered by petitioner as recorded in her OT authorization slips dated December 6 and 14, 1993.

Petitioner stated that she had no intention of rendering overtime. She just wanted to catch up with work backlog caused by her serving a previous penalty of suspension and, for that reason, she did not immediately file her OT authorization slips and was only prompted to submit the same when she was reminded by the HRD for the purpose of completing documentation.

On the other hand, Robles, petitioner's immediate supervisor, consistently denied having signed and approved petitioner's irregular OT authorization slips. He maintained that he did not authorize petitioner to render overtime work on those questioned dates and that petitioner's OT authorization slip dated December 14, 1993 had erasures which do not bear his initials.[17]

On February 8, 1994, the administrative investigation continued. It was attended by petitioner, Robles, Tamayo, Ms. Hornilla, Muñoz, Ms. Luague and a certain E.J. Dela Cruz, of the Jardine union. The proceedings were recorded in the minutes of the said meeting.[18]

On April 4, 1994, petitioner was terminated from employment for violation of Rule 32 of the Company Rules and Regulations penalizing with dismissal, the offense of "falsification of personnel, medical and other company records" in pursuit of personal gain.[19]

On May 5, 1994, the Jardine union filed with the National Conciliation and Mediation Board (NCMB), a Notice of Strike, docketed as NCMB Case No. NS-05-232-94, raising as one of the issues, the alleged illegal termination of petitioner's employment.[20] Several conciliation hearing was conducted by the NCMB but the parties were unable to resolve their differences.

On July 6, 1994, the Jardine union staged a strike.[21]

On July 8, 1994, respondent Jardine filed a complaint with the Arbitration Board of the National Labor Relations

Commission (NLRC) where it was docketed as NLRC NCR Case No. 07-05244-94. Respondent prayed that the strike staged by the Jardine union be declared illegal and that the individual respondents named in the complaint be ordered dismissed for having knowingly participated in the illegal strike.

In the meantime, respondent Jardine filed a complaint[22] on July 19, 1994 against petitioner with the Provincial Prosecution Office of Rizal for violation of Article 172 in relation to Article 171, paragraphs 2 and 6 of the Revised Penal Code.

On July 22, 1994, respondent and the Jardine union entered into a Compromise Agreement[23] whereby it was resolved, among others, that the legality of the termination of petitioner's employment should be decided by a panel of voluntary arbitrators.

On August 19, 1994, Labor Arbiter Yulo rendered a decision[24] dismissing NLRC NCR Case No. 07-05244-94 on the basis of the said Compromise Agreement.

On December 29, 1994, 2[nd] Asst. Prosecutor Bautista issued a Memorandum[25] for Rizal Provincial Prosecutor Mauro Castro, recommending that petitioner be indicted for the crime of falsification of private document on two (2) counts. Two (2) separate informations which were accordingly filed against petitioner were docketed as Criminal Cases Nos. 163751 and 163752 and subsequently raffled to Branch 61 of the Metropolitan Trial Court.[26] On arraignment, petitioner pleaded not guilty to both charges.

On March 6, 1995, respondent and the Jardine union signed a Submission Agreement whereby they agreed to subject the issue of whether or not petitioner's employment was terminated for cause and in accordance with due process, to voluntary arbitration.[27]

On May 24, 1995, the first arbitration conference[28] was held. Respondent and the Jardine union, representing petitioner, agreed on the composition of the Panel of Voluntary Arbitrators which includes Atty. Sixto A. Martinez, Jr. as Chairman; Efren P. Aranzamendez, representing the Jardine union; and Atty. Josephus B. Jimenez, representing respondent.

On June 6, 1995, the second arbitration conference was held. Muñoz, President of the Jardine union, represented the petitioner. At the said conference, the parties agreed that they would simultaneously file their respective position papers. They likewise agreed that the case shall be deemed submitted on the basis of their position papers and their reply.[29]

On June 28, 1995 and August 14, 1995, respondent Jardine and petitioner respectively filed their position papers.[30]

In the meantime, trial on the merits in Criminal Cases Nos. 163751 and 163752 started on August 29, 1995 and concluded on January 15, 1996.[31]

On December 28, 1995, the Panel of Voluntary Arbitrators rendered a decision of even date, upholding the termination of petitioner's employment and denying her claim for moral and exemplary damages.[32]

On May 14, 1996, Judge Maximo Contreras, Presiding Judge of Branch 61 of the Metropolitan Trial Court of Makati City, rendered a decision convicting petitioner in Criminal Case No. 163751 but acquitting her in Criminal Case No. 163752 because her alleged guilt was not satisfactorily shown.[33]

Petitioner questioned her conviction in Criminal Case No. 163752 before the Regional Trial Court of Makati City which subsequently rendered a decision reversing petitioner's conviction.[34]

Believing that the decision of the Panel of Voluntary Arbitrators may now be overturned following her acquittal

in the two criminal cases filed against her, petitioner filed with the Court of Appeals, a Petition for Certiorari under Rule 65 of the Revised Rules of Court assailing said decision.

But on August 27, 1997, the Court of Appeals rebuffed petitioner with a resolution denying due course to her petition.[35]

On September 18, 1997, petitioner filed a motion for reconsideration which the Court of Appeals denied on December 22, 1997.[36]

Hence, this petition.

Petitioner raised the following assignment of errors:

"I

THE RULING OF THE HONORABLE COURT OF APPEALS IN ITS RESOLUTION DATED AUGUST 27, 1997 THAT THE PETITION FOR REVIEW UNDER RULE 65 OF THE REVISED RULES OF COURT IS NOT THE PROPER REMEDY IS NOT IN ACCORD WITH THE DECISIONS OF THE HONORABLE SUPREME COURT IN CASES WHERE THE RIGHT TO APPEAL IS LOST DUE TO THE GROSS NEGLIGENCE OF COUNSEL.

II

THE HONORABLE COURT OF APPEALS DEPARTED FROM THE ACCEPTED AND USUAL COURSE OF JUDICIAL PROCEEDINGS IN DECIDING THE CASE ON ITS MERITS WITHOUT REQUIRING THE RESPONDENTS TO COMMENT ON THE PETITION FOR REVIEW UNDER RULE 65 OF THE REVISED RULES OF COURT.

III

THE HONORABLE COURT OF APPEALS DISREGARDED THE FUNDAMENTAL REQUIREMENT OF INTEGRITY, INDEPENDENCE AND IMPARTIALITY ON THE PART OF THE PANEL OF VOLUNTARY ARBITRATORS WHO IN PERFORMING QUASI-JUDICIAL FUNCTIONS SHOULD BE BOUND BY THE CODE OF JUDICIAL CONDUCT.

IV

THE HONORABLE COURT OF APPEALS PLACED MORE IMPORTANCE ON TECHNICALITIES THAN CONSIDERATION OF JUSTICE AND EQUITY WHICH ARE THE ULTIMATE ENDS OF THE RULES OF PROCEDURE."[37]

The petition lacks merit.

First. Entrenched is the rule that findings of facts of quasi-judicial agencies are accorded great respect and, at times, even finality, if supported by substantial evidence.[38] Thus the Court of Appeals ruled:

"The lifeblood, as it were, of this petition, hinges on the sole issue, here phrased: is an employee, who has been dismissed by his employer due to loss of trust, entitled to reinstatement upon his acquittal in a criminal action? The question is not at all new, having been addressed in a number of cases x x x.

"xxx

"The petition calls for the substitution of the trial court's judgment over that of the panel of voluntary arbitrators. After assaying RAMORAN'S argument, the Court believes that it is only proper to observe the principle enunciated in *Maranaw Hotels and Resorts Corporation v. Court of Appeals* (G.R. No. 103215, 215 SCRA 501 [1992]), that is, conclusions of voluntary arbitrator (or a panel as in this case) when they are

sufficiently corroborated by the evidence on record, should similarly be respected by appellate tribunals. On this score, the respondent panel found that:

"First, in the series of events that complainant herself admitted to have done was the punching of her time card for November 16, 17, 18, 22, 23 & 24, 1993 indicating her alleged overtime work performed which was inconsistent with her claim that 'at first I was not decided whether I would secure authorization for the overtime work. However, when Ms. Yolanda S. Carreon, an HRD clerk, reminded me to submit the required OT slip, I decided to apply for overtime authorization after all, I really rendered overtime work in order to make up for the time lost during my 5-day suspension'.

"Secondly, it is very apparent that complainant purposely submitted initially one overtime work on December 6, 1994 for the regular and overtime work on November 16 and after it was signed by Robles, complainant added the figures 17, 18, 22, 23 & 24, 1993. The initial entries of 'Virginia Ramoran to work on Bank Reconciliation from 5:00 TO 8:00', which is the authorized time and 5:00 to 7:45 for the actual time was the legitimate entry. We gave credence to the 'slash mark' of Robles appearing in Annex 1 of respondent (sic) position paper indicating that the only entry of OT authorization slip dated December 6, 1993 was for November 16, 1993 and the overtime for November 17, 18, 22, 23 & 24, 1993 only represent the actual time, the complainant having failed to indicate the authorized time. It must be noted that the authorized time must be indicated in the overtime authorization for the purpose of establishing and limiting the basis of overtime to be performed by an employee subject to the approval of the supervisor. We found that this procedure required before an employee can go on overtime is universally adopted by companies and corporations in the Philippines.

"The overtime authorization slip for alleged overtime work of complainant on December 13 and 14, 1993 was in reality the overtime authorization slip of Mr. Roderick Paat for December 14, 1993. Mr. Roderick Paat filled up the first column by indicating his name, the reason for the overtime which is to file BPI checks with an authorized time from 5:00 to 8:00. Complainant subsequently entered her alleged overtime work on December 13, 1993 and after the same was signed by Mr. Robles entered her alleged overtime on the December 14, 1993 which as shown in Annex 3 was written over the 'slash mark' of Mr. Robles. In as much as the overtime date of December 14, 1993 was already written by the complainant on the column for the overtime date, she added the figure 13 by intercalating the same before the figure 14, 1993. Roderick Paat [sic] overtime was only for December 14, 1993. Complainant had the reason to cancel the entry for Roderick Paat to make the same conform to the overtime authorization slip that covers two overtime dates, December 13 & 14, 1993.

"The acts of the complainant established by the documentary evidence submitted by the parties resulted in the payment to the complainant [sic] the total amount of P1,483.03"

"That the panel reached the conclusion it did is a product of evidentiary standard before quasi-judicial bodies. Dismissal on the basis of loss of trust and confidence calls for substantial evidence only xxx defined as the amount of relevant evidence which a reasonable mind might accept as adequate to justify a conclusion xxx. It does not demand proof beyond reasonable doubt of the employee's misconduct. xxx As pointed out by the panel, the petitioner submitted the case for decision without any evidence, documentary or testimonial, other than her own allegations, adopting only as her proof the overtime authorization slips involved. It should be noted that the panel did not have the benefit of examining the other evidence apparently adduced by RAMORAN in the criminal prosecution and there is no showing that the evidence in the latter proceeding was ever introduced before the panel. The voluntary arbitrators, therefore, cannot be faulted for so deciding based on the evidence made available to them. It cannot even be said that they disregarded the result of the criminal proceedings, for the judgment of acquittal came after they had rendered the decision. Be that as it may, even if the trial court found the same documentary evidence to be inadequate to sustain Ramoran's conviction, by no means does it prevent the panel from considering the evidence sufficient to warrant dismissal, inasmuch as:

'(t)he fact that the employee has been absolved in a criminal prosecution involving said misconduct does not

preclude the employer from attempting to prove the same before the labor arbiter or the latter from accepting that evidence as sufficient foundation for a finding of lawful termination from employment. xxx'

"As it is, errors in the appreciation of evidence cannot be reviewed by certiorari. xxx The petitioner has palpably failed to show that the panel, by so doing, gravely abused its discretion, a prime requirement for a writ of certiorari to issue. This should necessitate the outright dismissal of the petition." [39]

There is utterly no basis to depart from the foregoing disquisition of the Court of Appeals.

Second. Petitioner contends that the appellate court committed error when it decided the case on the merits without requiring the Panel of Voluntary Administrators to comment on the petition. But such failure does not result per se in a sanction similar to defaults in the trial courts since the appellate court may just decide the case on the basis of the records before it. [40]

Third. Petitioner claims that she was deprived of her right to due process of law because of the composition and actuations of the Panel of Voluntary Arbitrators.

We disagree.

The essence of due process is to be found in the reasonable opportunity to be heard and submit any evidence one may have in support of one's defense. [41] Due process does not necessarily require conducting an actual hearing but simply giving the party concerned due notice and affording an opportunity or right to be heard.

In the instant case, petitioner was apprised of the charges against her. During the administrative investigation scheduled on February 1 and 8, 1994, petitioner attended and was given an opportunity to give her side. She consented to resorting to voluntary arbitration and participated in the selection of arbitrators. The labor union, of which petitioner is a member and which represented the petitioner, nominated Atty. Aranzamendez; respondent Jardine nominated Atty. Jimenez, and these two arbitrators chose Atty. Martinez as the chairman of the Panel of Voluntary Arbitrators. Petitioner submitted herself to the jurisdiction of the Panel of Voluntary Arbitrators, by presenting her evidence and sought affirmative relief therein; hence, she cannot now validly question the latter's jurisdiction. [42] It is an undesirable practice for a party, after encountering an adverse judgment, to complain and question the proceedings where she had submitted her own evidence and claimed affirmative relief. [43]

Petitioner now expresses her doubt on the competence, probity and independence of the said Panel of Voluntary Arbitrators. She claims that respondent Jardine nominated Atty. Martinez as chairman knowing him to be a subordinate of Atty. Jimenez in the Legal Department of San Miguel Corporation where they both worked. Atty. Jimenez, as the Assistant General Counsel, actually outranked Atty. Martinez who was only an Associate Legal Counsel. Petitioner is implying that respondent Jardine nominated Atty. Martinez to the position of chairman of the panel so that his boss, Atty. Jimenez, who represented Jardine, may easily influence the decision of the panel.

Unfortunately, petitioner offers no evidence to prove her accusation. This Court has time and again stressed that allegations must be proven by sufficient evidence. Mere allegation is not evidence. [44] As observed by the appellate court and we quote:

"This relationship, gleaned by petitioner's present counsel from casual conversation with fellow practitioners, is admittedly uncorroborated. From this set of facts, petitioner makes the sweeping conclusion that the panel is 'in cahoots' with JARDINE, discounting the possibility that Atty. Jimenez and Atty. Martinez did concur on the resolution of the case. Without need of overstatement, this cannot be countenanced." [45]

Finally, there is no basis to mitigate petitioner's liability inasmuch as this is not the first time that petitioner was charged with falsification by respondent Jardine. She had in fact earlier served a five (5)-day suspension from

November 8-13, 1993 for admittedly tampering with the entries in Official Receipt No. 1013 issued by Limited Vision Center on July 7, 1993, in support of her application for the optical loan she had obtained from respondent Jardine.[46] Petitioner made it appear in the said official receipt that she had paid P6,980.00 for two (2) pairs of Rodenstoch Eyeglasses when the truth was, as admitted by her, the official receipts pertained to her purchase of contact lens solution from Limited Vision Center, for which she only paid P100.00.[47] Under its company rules, respondent Jardine was, strictly speaking, entitled to dismiss petitioner on that ground. However, due to petitioner's voluntary admission of the offense and for humanitarian reasons, she was only given a five (5)-day suspension. In a memorandum, respondent Jardine warned the petitioner that "any future violation of the same nature, irrespective of the time frame [sic] that it is repeated or committed, would result in the imposition of the maximum penalty of dismissal." [48] As aptly remarked by the appellate court "the seeds of mistrust had been sown, awaiting only the proper occasion for it to grow and fester." Petitioner, thus, had only herself to blame when she was finally dismissed, for cause, by respondent Jardine for the reason that she falsified her subject overtime authorization slips dated December 6 and 14, 1993 in violation of the Company Rules and Regulations.

WHEREFORE, the Petition is hereby DENIED. No pronouncement as to costs.

SO ORDERED.

Bellosillo, (Chairman), Mendoza, and Quisumbing, JJ., concur.

Buena, J., on leave.

[1] Special Twelfth Division composed of Associate Justices Hector L. Hofileña, Romeo J. Callejo and Artemio G. Tuquero.

[2] In CA G.R. Sp. No. 42397 and penned by Associate Justice Holifeña, Rollo, pp. 40-49.

[3] Rollo, pp. 51-56.

[4] Petition dated February 21, 1998, p. 3; Rollo, p. 11.

[5] Sub-annex "10" of Annex "1" of respondent's Comment; id., p. 143.

[6] Sub-annex "1" of Annex "1", supra, id., p. 129.

[7] Sub-annex "2" , id., p. 130.

[8] See Note No. 5.

[9] Sub-annex "3" of Annex "1" of respondent's Comment; Rollo, p. 131.

[10] Sub-annex "4" of Annex "1", supra, id., p. 132.

[11] See Note No. 5, supra at p. 144.

[12] Ibid.

[13] See Note No. 5, supra at pp. 144-145.

[14] Id., pp. 145-146.

[15] Sub-annex "5" of Annex "1" of respondent's Comment; Rollo, pp. 133-134.

[16] Sub-annex "6" of Annex "1", supra, id., p. 135.

- [17] Id., pp. 135-136.
- [18] Sub-annex "7" of Annex "1" of respondent's Comment; Rollo, p. 138.
- [19] Respondent's Comment, p. 7; id, p. 91.
- [20] Sub-annex "9" of Annex "1" of respondent's Comment; id, p. 140.
- [21] See note 19, supra at p. 92.
- [22] Docketed as I.S. No. 94-6926.
- [23] Sub-annex "12" of Annex "1" of respondent's Comment; Rollo, pp. 168-169.
- [24] Sub-annex "13" of Annex "1", supra, id., pp. 170-172.
- [25] Sub-annex "14" , id., pp.173-174.
- [26] Rollo, pp. 175-176.
- [27] Petition dated February 21, 1998, p. 5; Rollo, p. 13.
- [28] Ibid.
- [29] Petition, supra, pp. 5-6; id., pp. 13-14.
- [30] Id., p. 6; Rollo, p. 14.
- [31] Ibid.
- [32] Respondent's Comment, p. 11; Rollo, p. 95.
- [33] Petition dated February 21, 1998, p. 7; Rollo, p. 15.
- [34] Petition, supra, p. 8; id., p. 16.
- [35] Id., p. 9; id., p. 17.
- [36] Annex "B" of Petition, supra, Rollo, pp. 51-56.
- [37] Petition, supra, p. 10; Rollo, p. 18.
- [38] Triple Eight Integrated Services, Inc. v. NLRC, 299 SCRA 608, 614 (1998)
- [39] Rollo, pp. 44-46.
- [40] Regalado, Florenz D, Remedial Law Compendium, Vol. I, 1997 Ed., pp. 554-555.
- [41] Oil and Natural Gas Commission v. Court of Appeals, 293 SCRA 26, 46 (1998)
- [42] Hospicio de San Jose de Barili v. NLRC, 164 SCRA 516, 523 (1988)
- [43] Pimping v. Commission on Election, 140 SCRA 192, 216 (1985)
- [44] Coronel v. Court of Appeals, 263 SCRA 15, 35 (1996)
- [45] Resolution dated December 22, 1997, Rollo, p. 55.
- [46] Rollo, p. 157.
- [47] Record from the Court of Appeals, p. 43.

[48] See Note No. 46.

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