

THE TOP TEN FIFTH CIRCUIT EMPLOYMENT CASES OF 2015

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Mark J. Oberti
Ed Sullivan
Oberti Sullivan LLP
723 Main Street, Suite 340
Houston, Texas 77002
(713) 401-3555
mark@osattorneys.com
ed@osattorneys.com

Joseph Y. Ahmad
Ahmad Zavitsanos Anaipakos Alavi Mensing
3460 One Houston Center
1221 McKinney Street
Houston, Texas 77010
(713) 655-1101
joeahmad@azalaw.com

Scott McLaughlin
Jackson Walker L.L.P.
1401 McKinney Suite 1900
Houston, TX 77010
O: (713) 752-4301
smclaughlin@jw.com



1. *Burton v. Freescale Semiconductor, Inc.*, 792 F.3d 222 (5th Cir. 2015)

- Reversed SJ for employer in ADA disability discrimination case. In an aggressive opinion it found ample evidence of pretext in proof that:
 - Employer gave reasons for decision to terminate that a reasonable jury could conclude it did not know of at the time it made the decision.
 - After deciding to fire the plaintiff, the employer (with the staffing company's encouragement and participation) "acted to create an exculpatory paper trail."
 - The employer gave the EEOC reasons for termination that: (1) had not yet occurred when it made the decision to terminate; (2) were "flatly untrue;" and (3) conflicted with explanations given in court.
 - The employer had no *contemporaneous* documentation of the plaintiff's alleged serial poor performance even though its procedures indicated that such documentation should have existed if the serial poor performance had actually occurred.

2. *Zamora v. City of Houston*, 798 F.3d 326 (5th Cir. 2015)

- Affirmed jury verdict for the plaintiff HPD police officer in a retaliation case:
 - The “cat’s paw” doctrine was recognized by the U.S. Supreme Court in the context of cases that only require proof that illegal discrimination was a “motivating factor” in the challenged employment decision (*Staub*).
 - But, the Fifth Circuit nevertheless adopted the “cat’s paw” doctrine in cases, such as Title VII retaliation cases like this one, that require “but for” causation (so long as the higher standard of causation could still be satisfied).
 - The Fifth Circuit found ample proof that the “but for” standard was satisfied in this “cat’s paw” case because: (1) a reasonable jury could easily find that the plaintiff’s supervisors’ statements to Internal Affairs were the product of retaliatory animus against the plaintiff; (2) the Internal Affairs report relied almost exclusively on those statements to recommend that the plaintiff be suspended for ten days for untruthfulness; and (3) a disciplinary committee within HPD relied on the Internal Affairs report to recommend that the plaintiff be suspended to the Chief of Police; and (4) the Chief of Police implemented the ten day suspension based on the disciplinary committee’s recommendation. Thus, the “but for” causal chain was established.

3. *Goudeau v. Nat'l Oilwell Varco, L.P.*, 793 F.3d 470 (5th Cir. 2015)

- Reversed SJ for employer in an ADEA/TCHRA age discrimination case where the 57-year old plaintiff was fired and not replaced. Found:

- Because alleged age based comments by decision maker (calling older workers “old farts” saying the smoking area was where “old people met,” and telling the plaintiff he wore “old man clothes”) were offered as circumstantial evidence, not direct evidence, they were some evidence that the plaintiff was terminated because of his age for purposes of satisfying his *prima facie* case.
- There was sufficient evidence of pretext to survive SJ:
 - The decision maker’s alleged comments, albeit made 8 months to a year before the plaintiff’s termination, could be used to show pretext as well as a *prima facie* case.
 - The employee had worked at NOV 18 years with no discipline, but the decision maker gave him 5 warnings within 8 months, the last 4 of which were allegedly not given to him until the day he was actually fired, although they referred to different alleged incidents over the last two months. Further, none of the last 4 warnings were signed by the plaintiff, and the final warning had no signature by anyone.
 - Some of the warnings allegedly blamed the plaintiff for problems that were not part of his job duties to begin with.
 - The decision maker allegedly told the plaintiff he was going to fire another employee after asking about his age and referring to him as an “old fart,” and, sure enough, he later fired that employee.

4. *Paske v. Fitzgerald*, 785 F.3d 977 (5th Cir.), *pet. for cert. filed* (2015)

Affirmed SJ for employer in a reverse race discrimination case, finding the white ex-police officer failed to establish a *prima facie* case of race discrimination because the offense for which he was fired (refusal to obey the African-American police chief's direct order to immediately go to the department for drug testing) was not "nearly identical" to the alleged offenses that African-American officers allegedly committed and were not fired for (*e.g.*, lying about the hours they worked, leaving a gun unsecured in a police car, failure to report theft, and taking funeral leave on false pretenses).

- Held that the without such proof, the plaintiff could not even make out a *prima facie* case, and thus the burden of proof never even shifted to the employer to articulate a LNDR for termination. This ruling conflicts with rulings from the 3rd and 10th Circuits.
- Articulated the "nearly identical" test as the governing test for a *prima facie* case, without mentioning different articulations of the test that have been used by courts over the years that did not include that "stringent" requirement. This is arguably in tension with the ideas articulated in case law that: (1) what makes up a *prima facie* case is a flexible standard, depending on the specific factual context; and (2) a *prima facie* case is not meant to be extremely difficult to establish.

5. *Peterson v. Bell Helicopter*, 788 F.3d 384 (5th Cir. 2015)

A jury in a TCHRA age discrimination case found that the employer was motivated by age when it laid off the plaintiff in a RIF, but that it would have laid him off anyway even without considering age. Therefore, the plaintiff received no monetary damages award.

- But: (1) the plaintiff sought injunctive relief *after* final judgment was entered; (2) was granted some injunctive relief (prohibiting Bell from relying on age in future RIFs); and (3) on the basis of that relief was awarded attorney's fees of \$339,987.50 under Sections 21.125(a) and (b) of the TCHRA. The employer appealed.
- The Fifth Circuit reversed, holding that the award of attorney's fees was erroneous because "Peterson did not seek injunctive relief until his case was effectively concluded. This delay deprived Bell of the ability to present relevant evidence and defend itself from what turned out to be a sweeping and indeterminate injunction. . . because we vacate the only relief on which Peterson "prevailed," he was not entitled to collect attorney's fees."

6. *Nobach v. Woodland Village Nursing Ctr.*, 799 F.3d 374 (5th Cir. 2015)

Reversed and rendered jury verdict for the plaintiff in a Title VII religious discrimination because there was no evidence that, before terminating the plaintiff, any of the employer's decision makers knew that the plaintiff had refused the "pray the Rosary" with a nursing home patient because her religion allegedly precluded her from doing so.

The fact that plaintiff told the decision maker that her religious beliefs precluded her from doing so immediately *after* being told of termination, and the decision maker said she did not care, did not change the result.

7. *Bodle v. TXL Mort. Corp.*, 788 F.3d 159 (5th Cir. 2015)

Plaintiffs settled a claim against them in state court for breach of noncompete agreements brought by their ex-employer. The settlement contained a general release, but not specific reference to FLSA claims.

- Immediately after the aforementioned settlement, plaintiffs sued their ex-employer under the FLSA in federal court. The employer alleged that the state court case release barred their claims, and the district court agreed. The Fifth Circuit reversed, holding that the state court release did not bar the plaintiffs' claims because, "the parties never discussed overtime compensation or the FLSA in their settlement negotiations."
- Distinguished *Martin v. Spring Break*, a 5th Circuit 2012 case, which carved out a narrow exception that permitted private settlements of FLSA claims.

8. *Montano v. Montrose Restaurant Ass'n, Inc.*, __ F.3d __ (5th Cir. 2015)

Reversed and remanded SJ that had been entered for employer (Tony's) in an FLSA tip pooling case. Plaintiffs claimed Tony's illegally claimed the "tip credit" provided by the FLSA because they were illegally forced to share tips with "coffemen," who were not "employees who customarily and regularly receive tips."

- Customers left tips, but they were not designated to specific types of workers at the restaurant.
- The Fifth Circuit surveyed the the law (including the DOL's Field Ops. Handbook, Opinion Letters, and case law), and concluded that to be an employee who "customarily and regularly receive tips" (and thus properly included in a tip pool) the employee must "have more than *de minimis* interaction with the customers who leave the undesignated tips."
- Under this standard, there was a fact issue regarding whether the "coffemen," were "employees who customarily and regularly receive tips," because the evidence showed that "[f]rom a station in the kitchen, the coffeeman received orders from waiters and provided waiters drinks to give customers." *I.e.*, at best, the coffeemen's interaction with customers was *de minimis*.

9. *Hooks v. Landmark Indus., Inc.*, 797 F.3d 309 (5th Cir. 2015)

Not an FLSA or employment case. But, held that an unaccepted offer of judgment under Rule 68 – even if it offers complete relief – cannot moot a named plaintiff’s claim in a putative class action.

- Sided with Justice Kagan’s dissent in *Genesis*, an FLSA U.S. Supreme Court case.
- There is a circuit split on this issue. Pet. For cert. filed.
- For now, *Hooks* is a major victory for the plaintiffs’ FLSA bar, and defeats the “pick off” strategy defendants sometimes try to employ in FLSA collective action cases.

10. *Wallace v. Tesoro Corp.*, 796 F.3d 468 (5th Cir. 2015)

The Fifth Circuit held that similar to the rule in Title VII cases *vis a vis* the EEOC, a SOX retaliation plaintiff may only pursue in court a complaint that was within the “sweep of the OSHA investigation that can reasonably be expected to ensue from the administrative complaint [to OSHA].”

- Under this rule, the Plaintiff’s wire fraud based SOX retaliation claim was not exhausted as a matter of law.
- Note: this case has other good guidance for pleading a SOX retaliation claim to survive *Iqbal/Twombly*.

Bonus Case: *Gate Guard Servs. LP v. Perez*, 792 F.3d 554 (5th Cir. 2015)

Held that the DOL's pursuit of an FLSA "independent contractor" misclassification claim was egregious, frivolous, and legally unupportable, thus justifying an award under the bad faith provision of the Equal Access to Justice Act (the district court had found otherwise).

Found the DOL destroyed evidence, ambushed a low level employee for an interview without counsel, demanded a grossly inflated multi-million dollar penalty, opposed routine motions, filed "specious" motions, objected 102 times in a deposition of its lead investigator, refused to provide witness statements by falsely claiming privilege, and continued litigation after it became clear their claims were without merit.

DOL ultimately agreed to pay Gate Guard \$1.5 million.

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