



Citation: *EL v Canada Employment Insurance Commission*, 2023 SST 725

Social Security Tribunal of Canada Appeal Division

Leave to Appeal Decision

Applicant: E. L.

Respondent: Canada Employment Insurance Commission

Decision under appeal: General Division decision dated March 29, 2023
(GE-22-3571)

Tribunal member: Pierre Lafontaine

Decision date: June 7, 2023

File number: AD-23-325

Decision

[1] Leave to appeal is refused. This means the appeal will not proceed.

Overview

[2] The Applicant (Claimant) was suspended from his job because he did not comply with the employer's COVID-19 vaccination policy (Policy). He was refused an exemption based on religious beliefs. The Claimant then applied for Employment Insurance (EI) regular benefits.

[3] The Respondent (Commission) determined that the Claimant was suspended from his job because of misconduct, so it was not able to pay him benefits. After an unsuccessful reconsideration, the Claimant appealed to the General Division.

[4] The General Division found that the Claimant was suspended from his job following his refusal to follow the employer's Policy once his request for exemption based on his religious beliefs was denied. It found that the Claimant knew or ought to have known that the employer was likely to suspend him in these circumstances. The General Division concluded that the Claimant was suspended from his job because of misconduct.

[5] The Claimant seeks leave to appeal of the General Division's decision to the Appeal Division. He submits that the General Division did not decide an issue that he should have decided.

[6] I must decide whether the Claimant has raised some reviewable error of the General Division upon which the appeal might succeed.

[7] I refuse leave to appeal because the Claimant's appeal has no reasonable chance of success.

Issue

[8] Does the Claimant raise some reviewable error of the General Division upon which the appeal might succeed?

Analysis

[9] Section 58(1) of the *Department of Employment and Social Development Act* specifies the only grounds of appeal of a General Division decision. These reviewable errors are that:

1. The General Division hearing process was not fair in some way.
2. The General Division did not decide an issue that it should have decided. Or, it decided something it did not have the power to decide.
3. The General Division based its decision on an important error of fact.
4. The General Division made an error of law when making its decision.

[10] An application for leave to appeal is a preliminary step to a hearing on the merits. It is an initial hurdle for the Claimant to meet, but it is lower than the one that must be met on the hearing of the appeal on the merits. At the leave to appeal stage, the Claimant does not have to prove his case but must establish that the appeal has a reasonable chance of success based on a reviewable error. In other words, that there is arguably some reviewable error upon which the appeal might succeed.

[11] Therefore, before I can grant leave to appeal, I need to be satisfied that the reasons for appeal fall within any of the above-mentioned grounds of appeal and that at least one of the reasons has a reasonable chance of success.

Does the Claimant raise some reviewable error of the General Division upon which the appeal might succeed?

[12] The Claimant seeks leave to appeal of the General Division's decision to the Appeal Division.

[13] The Claimant submits that the General Division erred by failing to address the standard used by the Commission to decide whether an employee denied a religious exemption with their employer, and subsequently suspended from their employment, can still be eligible for EI benefits. The stated standard used by the Commission is "if they are able to demonstrate that their religious belief is authentic, and their faith requires a particular practice". The Claimant further submits that the decision made by the Commission based on applying this standard to deny his EI benefits violates his Charter right to freedom of religion. He submits that the General Division failed to address this issue.

[14] It is important to reiterate that the Commission's representations are not legally binding on the Tribunal. They simply reflect the opinion of the administrator who acts under the law. That opinion does not necessarily correspond to the law.¹

[15] The role of the General Division is to consider the evidence presented to it by both parties, to determine the facts relevant to the legal issue before it, and to articulate, in its written decision, its own independent decision with respect thereto.

[16] The General Division had to decide whether the Claimant was suspended from his job because of misconduct pursuant to the *Employment Insurance Act* (EI Act).²

[17] The notion of misconduct does not imply that it is necessary that the breach of conduct be the result of wrongful intent; it is sufficient that the misconduct be conscious, deliberate, or intentional. In other words, in order to constitute misconduct, the act complained of must have been wilful or at least of such a careless or negligent nature that one could say the employee wilfully disregarded the effects their actions would have on their performance.

¹ See for example: *Canada (Attorney General) v Greey*, 2009 FCA 296, *Canada (Attorney General) v Savard*, 2006 FCA 327.

² Pursuant to sections 30 and 31 of the *Employment Insurance Act*.

[18] The General Division's role is not to judge the severity of the employer's penalty or to determine whether the employer was guilty of misconduct by suspending the Claimant in such a way that his suspension was unjustified, but rather of deciding whether the Claimant was guilty of misconduct and whether this misconduct led to his suspension.³

[19] Based on the evidence, the General Division determined that the Claimant lost his job because he refused to follow the Policy. He had been informed of the employer's Policy and was given time to comply. He was not granted an exemption for religious beliefs. The Claimant refused intentionally; this refusal was wilful. This was the direct cause of his suspension. The General Division found that the Claimant knew or ought to have known that his refusal to comply with the Policy could lead to his suspension. The General Division concluded from the preponderant evidence that the Claimant's behavior constituted misconduct.

[20] It is well-established that a deliberate violation of the employer's policy is considered misconduct within the meaning of the EI Act.⁴

[21] It is not really in dispute that an employer has an obligation to take all reasonable precautions to protect the health and safety of its employees in their workplace. In the present case, the employer implemented its Policy to protect the health of all employees during the pandemic. The Policy was in effect when the Claimant was suspended.

[22] The question of whether the employer unreasonably denied the Claimant's request for an exemption based on his religious beliefs, or whether the employer's Policy violated his Human and Charter rights, is a matter for another forum. This Tribunal is not the appropriate forum through which the Claimant can obtain the remedy that he is seeking.⁵

³ *Canada (Attorney General) v Marion*, 2002 FCA 185; *Fleming v Canada (Attorney General)*, 2006 FCA 16.

⁴ *Canada (Attorney General) v Bellavance*, 2005 FCA 87; *Canada (Attorney General) v Gagnon*, 2002 FCA 460.

⁵ In *Paradis v Canada (Attorney General)*, 2016 FC 1282, the Claimant argued that the employer's policy violated his rights under the *Alberta Human Rights Act*. The Court found it was a matter for another

[23] The Federal Court has rendered a recent decision in *Cecchetto* regarding misconduct and a claimant's refusal to follow the employer's COVID-19 vaccination policy.

[24] The Federal Court confirmed the Appeal Division's decision that, by law, this Tribunal is not permitted to address these questions. The Court agreed that by making a personal and deliberate choice not to follow the employer's vaccination policy, the Claimant had breached his duties owed to the employer and had lost his job because of misconduct under the EI Act. The Court stated that there exist other ways in which the Claimant's claims can properly advance under the legal system.

[25] In the previous *Paradis* case, the Claimant was refused EI benefits because of misconduct. He argued that the employer's policy violated his rights under the *Alberta Human Rights Act*. The Federal Court found it was a matter for another forum.

[26] The Federal Court stated that there are available remedies for a claimant to sanction the behaviour of an employer other than transferring the costs of that behaviour to the Employment Insurance Program.

[27] In the *Mishibinijima* case, the Federal Court of Appeal stated that the employer's duty to accommodate is irrelevant in deciding EI misconduct cases.

[28] The preponderant evidence before the General Division shows that the Claimant, after being denied a religious exemption, **made a personal and deliberate choice** not to follow the employer's Policy in response to the exceptional circumstances created by the pandemic and this resulted in him being suspended from work.

forum; See also *Mishibinijima v. Canada (Attorney General)*, 2007 FCA 36, stating that the employer's duty to accommodate is irrelevant in deciding misconduct cases.

[29] I see no reviewable error made by the General Division when it decided the issue of misconduct solely within the parameters set out by the Federal Court of Appeal, which has defined misconduct under the EI Act.⁶

[30] I am fully aware that the Claimant may seek relief before another forum if a violation is established. This does not change the fact that under the EI Act, the Commission has proven on a balance of probabilities that the Claimant was suspended because of misconduct.

[31] In his application for leave to appeal, the Claimant has not identified any reviewable errors such as jurisdiction or any failure by the General Division to observe a principle of natural justice. He has not identified errors in law nor identified any erroneous findings of fact, which the General Division may have made in a perverse or capricious manner or without regard for the material before it, in coming to its decision.

[32] After reviewing the docket of appeal, the decision of the General Division and considering the arguments of the Claimant in support of his request for leave to appeal, I find that the appeal has no reasonable chance of success.

Conclusion

[33] Leave to appeal is refused. This means the appeal will not proceed.

Pierre Lafontaine
Member, Appeal Division

⁶ *Paradis v Canada (Attorney General)*; 2016 FC 1282; *Canada (Attorney General) v McNamara*, 2007 FCA 107; CUB 73739A, CUB 58491; CUB 49373.